

9

The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival
in Another World

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime



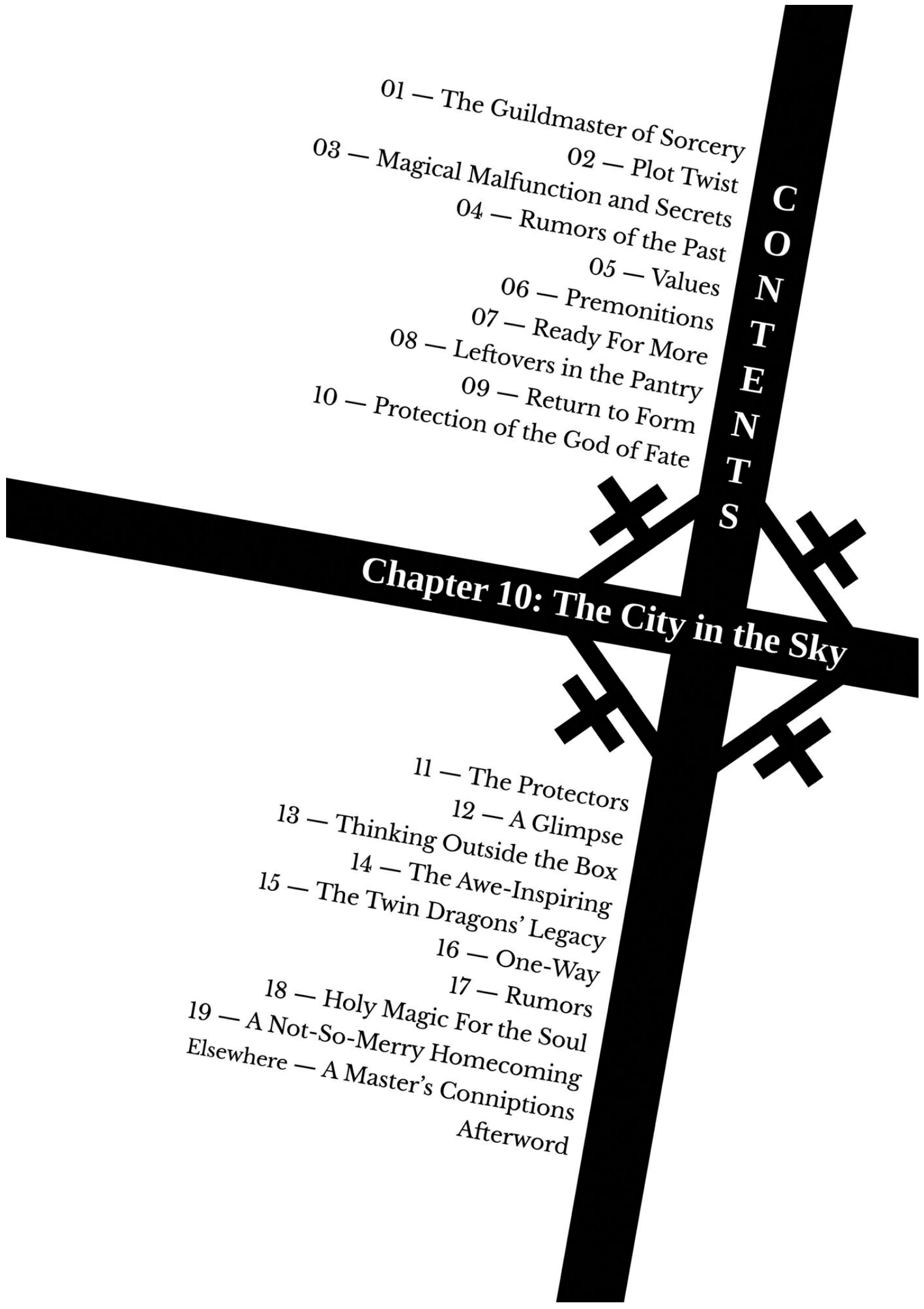
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- 
- 01 — The Guildmaster of Sorcery
02 — Plot Twist
03 — Magical Malfunction and Secrets
04 — Rumors of the Past
05 — Values
06 — Premonitions
07 — Ready For More
08 — Leftovers in the Pantry
09 — Return to Form
10 — Protection of the God of Fate

Chapter 10: The City in the Sky

- 11 — The Protectors
12 — A Glimpse
13 — Thinking Outside the Box
14 — The Awe-Inspiring
15 — The Twin Dragons' Legacy
16 — One-Way
17 — Rumors
18 — Holy Magic For the Soul
19 — A Not-So-Merry Homecoming
Elsewhere — A Master's Connptions
Afterword

Chapter 10: The City in the Sky

01 — The Guildmaster of Sorcery

Moments after being transported to Neldahl by the pope, we spent a while mesmerized by the splendor of the room we had arrived in.

“We must be in the City in the Sky. This is amazing,” Lydia murmured in awe.

It was so amazing that even she couldn’t help but comment on it. Nadia shared her sister’s curiosity, but with a little more caution in her demeanor.

The first thing to catch my eye was the gem-studded chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Drawn to its gaudy glistening, I noticed a mural of vibrant colors like a kaleidoscope on the ceiling. When I was finally able to rip my gaze away, the next thing to strike me was the sight of the warmly colored walls, reflecting the sunlight pouring in from the many windows, without a single mark or flaw. The abundance of natural light made the whole room feel as if it were shining. Furnishings decorated the space tastefully, and everything seemed to harmonize with each other.

After recovering from the shock, we proceeded to the door marked “Entrance” and opened it. A single monotonous hallway extended outward. Something about it felt strangely ominous and intimidating, unlike the welcoming room we stood in.

With a small breath, I took the first step forward, and my foot sank deeper into the carpet than expected. It was thick and completely soundproof. I’d walked on similar carpets in my past life, but nothing on this level. It made me oddly nervous. What reason would they have for something like this?

As we continued down the corridor, I noticed magic lights placed along the walls at irregular intervals, but their purpose seemed less for lighting our path and more for illuminating the paintings on the walls. They were all abstract and impossible to decipher.

The one thing I *did* manage to determine was why the hall felt so cramped: the ceiling was getting lower the farther we went. I only noticed it after turning around to glance behind us, and the thick carpet likely played a role in the effect—whatever its purpose might be.

We pressed on, spurred by the courage given to us by having solved at least one of the many mysteries surrounding the place. After some hundred meters or so of idle conversation about the strange paintings, we arrived at a large, forbidding door. Before I could figure out if we were supposed to open it ourselves, it began to rumble open all on its own. Nadia and Lydia gasped while I simply smirked at Lord Reinstar's craftiness.

Through the door, beams of sunlight hit us from the right. Looking that way, the wall was, in fact, a giant pane of glass—an extremely rare material in this world. A cloudless sky stretched out as far as the eye could see.

"Sure is a far cry from that tiny hallway," I said. "Look at the view."

"It really makes the trip worth it all on its own," Nadia replied.

"Yes, I agree," said Lydia, "though I would still like to learn the secret of what keeps Neldahl afloat."

I had brought them along purely on a whim, so it was nice to hear them being so positive.

"That would be Lord Reinstar's work, so I bet someone related to him might know. Or the guildmaster," I said.

"I'll have to hear the story."

"There's a good chance I'll be busy trying to get my healing magic back, so feel free to ask around in the meantime."

"You're right. We're here on business. I apologize." Lydia lowered her head and Nadia followed suit. It made me feel awkward.

"No, really, it's fine," I insisted. "I'll ask for help if I need it, but you can spend the rest of our time here however you want. I'd actually prefer it that way."

We approached the door before us, and like the first one, it opened by itself, this time revealing a vast garden of blooming flowers.

“They definitely like to outdo themselves,” I said. “I’ve never seen a garden like this before.”

“It is impressive,” Nadia agreed. “One can only imagine how many gardeners they must need to employ to keep it so beautiful.”

“Nadia, there might be elves!” Lydia exclaimed excitedly.

Nadia smiled with amusement. Being a spirit magic user, Lydia must have had something of an interest in the elvish people. It reminded me of some friends in Yenice I wanted to visit once I reacquired my powers.

“All right, where to next?” I murmured. “That big building looks like a good place to start.” Past the admittedly eye-catching garden, there was a distant yet distinctly large building. “I can sense strong magic coming from there, so I think it’s gotta be the Sorcerer’s Guild. Let’s check it out.”

“Yes, sir,” the sisters replied.

Signs throughout the area pointed us in the right direction, so we managed not to get lost and the scenery certainly wasn’t boring. We proceeded towards our destination, taking in the amazing sights and appreciating the lengths Neldahl went to to create such an experience for its visitors. I had to think of a few ideas for Yenice once everything was settled.

Without the directions, it would have felt like we were wandering through a labyrinth. Heck, for all I knew it really *would* turn into a labyrinth during emergencies.

Eventually, we reached our stop, and it looked more like a fortress than any guildhall I had ever seen. The doors opened for us just like all the others. Inside was a grand hall rivaling the room we had arrived in. Directly ahead was a reception desk, with stairs leading down to the left and up to the right. Even more interesting was the seemingly endless corridor of bookshelves crammed with tomes behind the desk.



I couldn't help but wonder if one of those books contained a hint for regaining my abilities.

"Well, this is something," I remarked. "Let's head to reception."

The sisters followed as I approached the desk. A bespectacled woman of about thirty-ish appeared from the library in the back.

"My name is Luciel, healer of the Republic of Saint Shurule," I said in greeting. "The two behind me are my attendants. I've come with a letter from the pope to the guildmaster. May we meet with him?"

"Of course. One moment, please," the receptionist replied, pulling out an arclink crystal.

It seemed Neldahl was similar to Shurule in terms of communication standards. I glanced around at the guildhall's interior to kill time while the woman conversed telepathically, and I spotted more direction signs hanging from the ceiling. At least we wouldn't get lost, but I would've liked something to hold on to as well.

"Pardon the wait," the receptionist finally said. "Someone will be with you shortly."

"Thank you. May I ask a question in the meantime?"

"I will do my best to answer."

"Appreciated. Do you have any maps of the guild or guides on the city in stock?" I asked.

"Yes, we do. They...come at a fee, however."

Running a facility of this size probably cost a small fortune, but then again it was open to the public for free. Perhaps the quality of service or level of access differed depending on what you purchased, or maybe Neldahl facilitated rivalries among the nations and people by giving special treatment to whoever could provide the highest donations.

Of course, it would have been faster to be upfront and just ask about it.

"That's fine. How much?" I replied.

“An encyclopedia of all of Neldahl will cost ten gold pieces. A guide to the Sorcerer’s Guild will be five gold pieces,” the woman answered.

In Japan, that would come out to about fifteen million yen. It was within my budget but certainly not cheap. The cost of living here must have been through the roof. Thank the heavens I had my magic bag.

“I’ll take both,” I said.

I took out fifteen coins exactly, and the receptionist blinked at them in surprise. She probably hadn’t expected anyone to actually buy a couple of maps for such a price. The fact that they dealt in gold, though, told me that Neldahl must have regular business with the outside world. I could feel myself getting excited at the thought of all the mysteries and magic of a flying city, though not as much as Lydia, surely.

Part of me hoped buying both at once would net me something special, but maybe that was wishful thinking.

“You’re certain?” the woman asked.

“There’s a chance we’ll be here for a while, so I think a map would go a long way in making our stay smoother,” I replied.

There might be some smart, famous, or important people from all over the world here, and I didn’t want to get on any of their bad sides because I was wandering around aimlessly. My smile seemed to convince the timid receptionist, so she handed me a hardback book and a small pamphlet. The latter was in line with my expectations, but I hadn’t expected to get a full B5-sized volume out of the transaction.

“This will tell you everything there is to know about Neldahl,” she said, pointing at the larger tome. She gestured towards the smaller book. “This is a map and guide to the Sorcerer’s Guild, as well as your pass to the archives of magic.”

I flipped through the large volume, noting the lack of information in certain places as well as the descriptions on how to use certain facilities, why they had been made, and other trivia. It’d make a good souvenir for Kefin.

“You said the guide was my pass to an ‘archive of magic’?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. Not many visitors purchase it, so we throw something special in as a little incentive.”

“The pass, you mean.”

“Yes, sir,” the woman said. “We sell tickets to the archives, but at five gold for a day of access. I think you’ll find your purse will be very happy with this arrangement.”

“You’re right about that. Whose idea was this?”

“Why, the former guildmaster and founder of Neldahl itself, Lord Reinstar.”

That guy had made this place not as a tourist attraction, but a genuine oasis of knowledge for people with the drive to seek it.

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than I heard the tapping of footsteps coming up the left staircase. A woman emerged, and a single glance at her face made me freeze in shock. She was the spitting image of the woman we’d been speaking with at the reception desk. Were they twins?

“You said we have guests, Guildmaster?” the new woman asked. She looked at her twin behind the desk and anger filled her eyes in an instant. “Wait, what in the *world* are you doing transformed like that?!”

The receptionist(?) guffawed heartily. “Oh, I couldn’t help myself when I heard it was a request from Her Holiness.” The stranger turned back to us. “Hello, friends. I am the guildmaster of the Sorcerer’s Guild, but you may call me Olford. Let us move this conversation somewhere more comfortable.”

The woman called Olford began to ascend the stairs to the right, gesturing for us to follow, but the other woman shook with rage and shouted at her back, “You’ll do it in your *own* skin, if you don’t mind!”

“Oh, fine,” Olford relented. “Release!”

A puff of smoke engulfed Olford’s form before dissipating a second later and revealing not a woman but a gentle old man with a long white beard and a somber blue robe. My jaw dropped. His magic was something I had been quite interested in at one point in my life.

“Excuse me,” I said, unable to contain my curiosity, “what affinity of magic

was that spell?”

“A combination of water and fire,” he replied placidly. “Now, off we go.”

He spoke like it was no big deal to him, and if he was the guildmaster of the legendary Sorcerer’s Guild, it probably wasn’t. A man like him could surely help me get my holy magic back.

Olford summarily ignored the woman’s question about why she had even been called to the desk and proceeded up the stairs. At the top was a rather tasteful room contrasting the showy splendor of the hall before.

“This is my room,” Olford said.

I followed him inside, but he passed right by the obvious sitting area and headed for the mirror in the back. Then he kept walking—straight through it.

“Did he just...disappear?” I asked bemusedly.

“Maybe?” the sisters replied, unsure.

A moment later, Olford poked his head out of the mirror with a mischievous grin and let out that same friendly guffaw as before. “Got you! This is a magic mirror. Only those with the appropriate mana signature or authorized individuals may enter.”

“You totally forgot to authorize us, didn’t you?” I answered flatly.

“Don’t be a poor sport, now! Come along.” With that, the old man disappeared back into the mirror. He certainly seemed to be the mischievous type, but maybe part of that was to alleviate my tension.

“He *definitely* forgot,” I said to the girls.

“He is rather advanced in years, after all,” Nadia said.

“I think he just likes to play with people,” Lydia remarked. “I could tell he didn’t mean anything by it.”

Well, he had certainly alleviated *their* tension, but I’d been feeling rather on edge since coming here. Like someone was testing me.

I took a breath to calm my nerves. “Better follow him.”

Holding my hand cautiously in front of me, I stepped towards the mirror.

When I saw my hand slip inside, I proceeded through it more confidently, and on the other side was the exact same room. Except, well, mirrored.

“Where are we?” I muttered.

“Ah, there you are,” Olford said. “*This* is my real office. The prior one is a decoy we put together to counteract the occasional ill-mannered miscreant who likes to barge in unannounced.” The girls entered next. “Now, sit. Relax.”

“Thank you.” I accepted his offer, waving Nadia and Lydia over to sit with me when I saw them standing behind the sofa. “Allow me to properly introduce myself. My name is Luciel, S-rank of the Healer’s Guild. I appreciate you making time to meet with me.”

“I know I mentioned manners before, boy, but this is bordering on stoic. Really, relax. Speak freely.”

I realized I was actually more nervous than I thought. The kindly old man seemed to see through me with strikingly bright and lucid eyes.

“I appreciate the kindness. I’ll work on it,” I said. “I have a letter from Her Holiness, addressed to you.”

“Understood. By the way, do you drink tea by any chance?”

“Yes, I suppose I do on occasion.”

Olford chuckled deeply. “Just a moment.”

He stood from his seat, that grin still on his face, and began to prepare drinks in the small kitchen.

“Those eyes of his,” Lydia remarked quietly. “I wonder if he might have an appraisal skill of some kind.”

“It’s possible,” Nadia agreed.

“That would make him the third person I’ve met with the ability,” I replied. “But I don’t think it’s appraisal, necessarily. It’s something else. Something that sees *deeper*.”

Lord Reinstar and Vlad had both had appraisal skills, and that sensation had felt more like a constant watchful gaze. It felt somehow different with Olford.

“Deeper?” Nadia echoed.

“Yeah. Like he can gauge the exact kind of person you are with his eyes alone.” I vaguely recalled feeling something similar a long time ago, but I couldn’t pin it down. “Or maybe not being a healer is messing with me. My thoughts and emotions are changing.”

“Sir?”

“At any rate, it’s good that I know my head’s a little jumbled. Compared to Olford, I really am just a boy, but I’ll take that to mean I’ve still got plenty of room to grow.”

Lydia gave me a worried look, telling me my attempt at self-deprecating humor hadn’t gone over very well. It did manage to sort out my insecurities, though.

Nadia put her hand to her chin and thought for a moment, then said, “I’m curious to know what Olford was hoping to find in you.”

“Likewise, but we’ll just have to go with the flow for now,” I said.

“I’ll take *that* to mean you’ve finally calmed your nerves?”

“I sure hope so.”

Olford returned with the tea with perfect timing. “I hope I haven’t parched you.”

“Not at all. I used the time to sort my thoughts out,” I replied.

“Very good. I’ll read that letter while you drink, then.”

I handed him the pope’s missive in exchange for a cup of tea. As his eyes scanned every line, I took the opportunity to savor the beverage. A single sip filled my nose with a sweet aroma and my mouth with a very mild yet distinct deliciousness. It wasn’t the least bit bitter, and the sisters appeared to share in my enjoyment, though I preferred my tea a little sweeter—even more so now to soothe my tired mind.

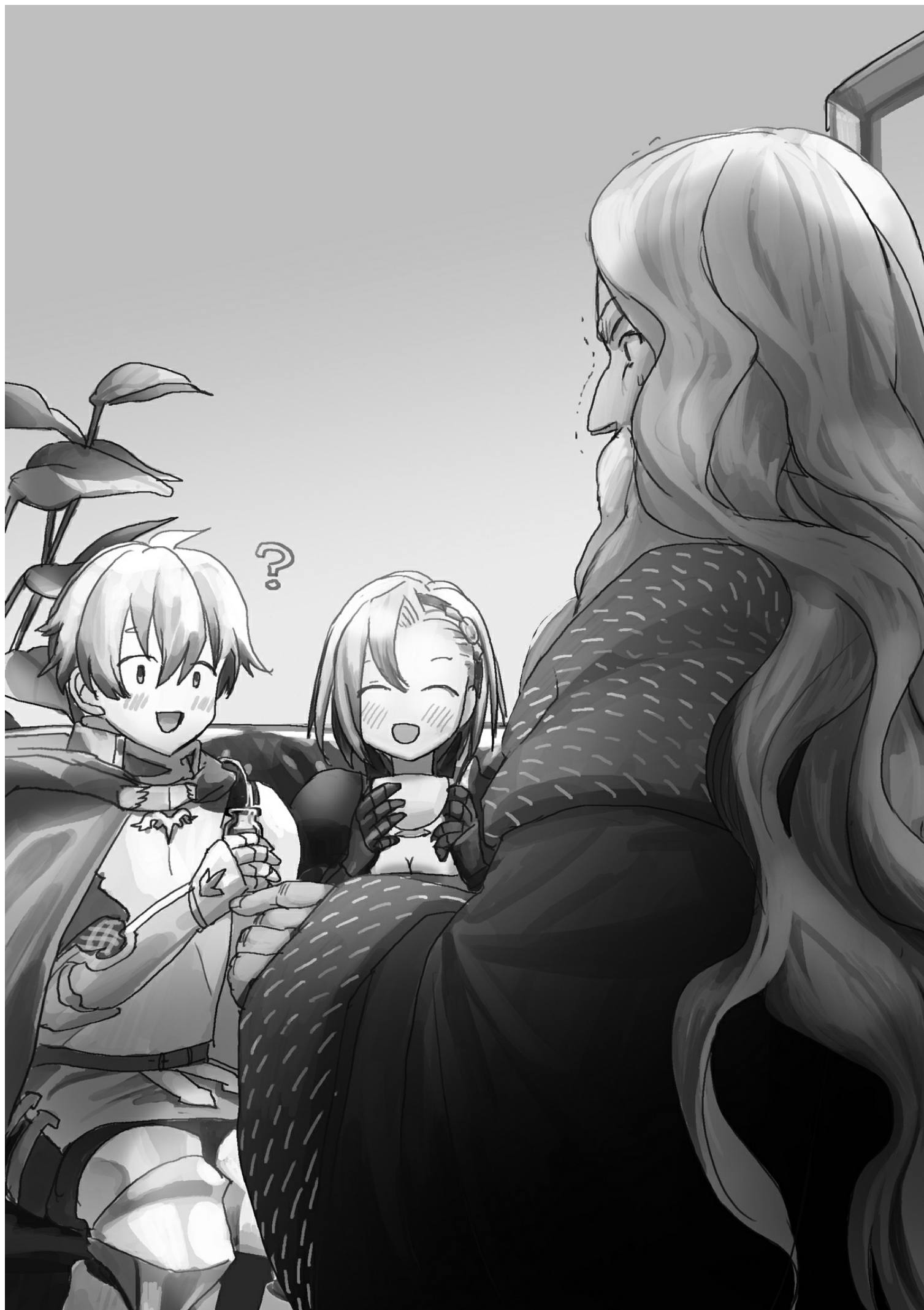
While Olford was busy with the letter, I furtively took out a bottle of honey and added a dab to my drink. Lydia and Nadia noticed and promptly asked for some themselves, so I obliged. They brought their cups to their lips with newly

sweetened smiles.

I started to stow the bottle back in my magic back when I looked up and met Olford's gaze.

"Is that...honey?" he asked, his voice shaking. "Is that *honey* you have? Vespian *honey*?"

For a moment, my heart nearly stopped. I thought he was angry, but the expression on his face wasn't one of rage.



“Is that bad?” I asked in reply.

I handed over the bottle, which Olford looked up, down, and all over carefully before opening it and inhaling a large whiff of the scent.

“It’s unmistakable,” he said resolutely. “My word. Vespian honey. Where did you acquire this?”

“At my honeyworks. I’m on good terms with the vespians,” I answered. “So, about that letter...”

“Yes, right. You’ve lost your class and holy magic as a consequence of exploiting the forbidden arts. However, your *affinity* for that magic remains, so the pope has requested my aid in helping you regain what you’ve lost. There were other, less important details as well.”

“I see,” I said. “Then I second that request. I beg you, Guildmaster. Please help me.”

“On one condition,” Olford replied quickly.

“Anything, as long as it’s within my power.”

“Honey,” he stated. “Bring me mountains of honey, and you will have my aid.”

“That can be arranged. As soon as I get my powers back, I’ll have a shipment sent to you, as well as our specialty alcohol.”

“G-Goodness gracious! Then what are we doing wasting time here? To the magic archive! If a solution exists, by the gods, I’ll find it!”

“Right. Thanks...”

Was it ethical for a guildmaster to be this easily swayed? I didn’t know the answer, but I was glad to have someone so qualified helping me on this journey.

02 — Plot Twist

Olford practically leaped from his seat, and we had to move fast to keep pace with him. Passing through the mirror again, I expected us to head for the archive downstairs, but instead he stopped in front of a tapestry hanging on the opposite wall. Printed on it was a diagram of a magic circle.

“This isn’t decorative, is it?” I asked.

The old man gave a low chuckle. “Wait until you see where it leads.”

He removed the tapestry to reveal a small door. Inside was a tiny, closet-like space with a magic circle that seemed to bear the guild’s insignia on a cloth in the center. After removing even that, there was yet *another* circle underneath. A magic circle under a fake magic circle in a hidden room. What was Lord Reinstar, a ninja?

Olford stood on the circle gleefully and the rest of us followed suit.

“Is there a capacity limit here or something?” I asked.

“We’re only going a hop and a skip away, so not to worry,” he replied.

The circle lit up, and in the blink of an eye we were somewhere new. The archive we found ourselves in extended upward in the shape of a column, with bookshelves lining the curved walls. I’d never seen so many books in one place before. My first thought was that we were in the archive behind reception, but this looked to be somewhere entirely different. I was speechless at the sheer scale of it.

“See?” Olford said. “I will scour the restricted section while the rest of you browse at your leisure. Only certain personnel are allowed in here, but if anyone gives you trouble, simply mention my name.”

Despite his warning, I couldn’t sense a single librarian nearby. Perhaps they were concealing themselves by some means, but that only made me curious to know how. Also, this *was* the Sorcerer’s Guild, so I could see the place being managed by golems or something.

“I have just one question,” I said. “Why do you call this an ‘archive’ and not a

library?”

There were a staggering number of books here, absolutely, but not much else. I was curious to know what earned it such a specific moniker. Olford, however, simply laughed and went on his way.

While I wondered what that could possibly mean, the sisters were glancing impatiently at all the tomes.

“Olford already gave us the okay, so feel free to pick out and read whatever catches your eye,” I told them. “I’m sure we’ll be back, but I have a feeling we won’t have many chances to do casual reading.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nadia replied.

“I don’t know how I could possibly decide where to start,” Lydia said, her eyes dancing.

The two went off to dig for something while I found a seat nearby. Olford’s response to my question still weighed on my mind. What secrets was this place hiding?

Setting that mystery aside for later, I remembered the books I’d purchased at reception. One of them was supposed to be my pass in and out of here. Taking out the guild pamphlet, I noticed a magic seal printed on it. Was that my key to areas like this? It would certainly be a useful measure for security and keeping track of who was coming and going. I’d have to test it when we were done.

If they could turn a small book into a key, I wondered what other contrivances existed in Neldahl. Lord Reinstar surely wouldn’t disappoint on that front. I was surprised by how curious I was, but imagining all the things I might discover was just so exciting when it involved the legend himself. I thought of Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian and smiled to myself, picturing the ruckus they’d raise trying to figure out all the mechanisms. A city like this had to be harboring not only the secret to regaining my magic but all manner of knowledge.

I took a breath to steady myself and flipped open the pamphlet. My gaze immediately fell on one of the subheadings: “Why is the Sorcerer’s Guild situated in the City in the Sky?”

Neldahl hadn’t been created specifically for the guild. That much I knew from

my conversation with Reinstar. So why then? I read on and found the answer in a single line.

“He who controls the skies controls the war.”

I’d heard that quote somewhere before. Further reading revealed the words had resonated deeply with the guildmaster at the time, so he had pleaded with Neldahl’s hero to allow his guild to reside in the city. And considering “hero” was basically synonymous with “Lord Reinstar” in this world, I had a feeling I knew who it was.

I was surprised that this information hadn’t been expunged. Reinstar had spoken of Neldahl as if it were some secret shelter or abode of his, so I would have expected his involvement to be more confidential. Maybe he’d been under contract? Then again, the man had founded a country of healers by then, so he’d already had a track record.

According to the text, the hero had only accepted the plea on several conditions, and the pamphlet listed them. They were to exist passively, be a hindrance to no one, and only allow access to those seeking genuine knowledge of the magical arts.

“It’s like Rockford, but with magic instead of crafting,” I murmured.

It seemed like Lord Reinstar had been after a hub of technological advancement. And despite its name being the *Sorcerer’s* Guild, the facilities listed were for researching all manner of magical things, not just spells. As I read on, I learned that fields of study were broadly categorized as magic items, spellcrafting, and arcane engineering. Each branch also had subdivisions, and their facilities were marked on the map.

“The more dangerous experiments take place in the city’s lower strata,” I muttered as I read. “It can’t be...” I had one of my famous bad feelings, but I also felt that I could gain a lot from studying here.

When I finished skimming the pamphlet, I looked up. Olford still hadn’t returned, and the sisters were engrossed in their own books. I turned my eyes back down and opened the large hardback about Neldahl as a whole. The moment I did, light flashed out of the pages and a hologram floated in front of me.

“Welcome to Neldahl, the City in the Sky,” it said. “I am the hero responsible for its founding, and it is my hope that within these pages you will find an understanding of my passion for the awe-inspiring.”

And then nothing more. The message was short.

“What in the world was that guy’s deal?” I murmured.

The hologram had been a little fuzzy, but it had been enough for me to recognize the face as Lord Reinstar’s. Especially after meeting him in person at Rockford.

I flipped the page and was met this time by normal words rather than a hologram, detailing the various aspects of the city. For a city, though, it was actually rather small at only three kilometers wide and about two kilometers from end to end vertically. I almost felt it was *too* small, but I also sensed some of Reinstar’s peculiar taste in the compactness of his own personal flying base.

There had to be some reason he’d chosen to put it in the sky, like the strategic advantage of having a fortress that could effectively reign over the battlefield; the other countries likely didn’t have any counter-defense for aerial attacks. If they did, I didn’t know about any, and they’d most certainly not be anything easily employed, especially considering the powerful barrier protecting the city. According to the book, not even the breath of a black dragon could penetrate it. So not only were your avenues of attack limited, but even if you had one, it was doubtful you would actually be able to scratch the city. If this place ever fell into the wrong hands, there would be mass destruction. It was *that* high-tech.

Lord Reinstar could probably have still shot it out of the sky, though. I had never seen a black dragon before, so I couldn’t say how formidable they were, but if they were anything close to red dragons, I had to wonder what the hell kind of nonsense that man must have been getting up to in order to learn that information. Then again, this was the king of nonsense we were talking about. Also, if the punch line here was that this black dragon was actually the Eternal Dragon of darkness known as the Umbra Dragon, I would not find it funny.

I flipped the page and immediately cursed myself for speaking of the devil.

“Our city is defended by circles of magic imbued by the hero himself,” the

book read. “It is said that Neldahl is safeguarded by the powers of the Spirit of Gales and the twin dragons of water and wind.”

“Are you kidding me?!” I snapped. “I signed up for *one* spirit, not two *dragons*!”

I couldn’t believe it. I had expected the Spirit of Gales, but Eternal Dragons too? *Two* of them? The thought made me shudder. A statistically significant portion of my encounters with the dragons had involved combat—combat in which I would have died without healing magic. Just thinking about going up against one in my current state made me break out in a cold sweat.

I’d never had to fight a spirit before, so I had thought I’d be safe in Neldahl. I was wrong, however, and I started to panic.

“Sir, are you okay?” Nadia asked, hurrying over.

“Did something happen?” her sister added.

The concern in their expressions elicited a wave of guilt in me.

“Sorry for disturbing you,” I told them. “My emotions have been a little unstable ever since I lost my healer class.”

Evidently, I owed more to my job than just the ability to cast healing magic.

“You don’t need to act strong. We came this far to be here for you,” said Nadia.

“Tell us what’s on your mind,” Lydia urged me.

The kinder they were, the worse I felt.

“I appreciate you worrying about me, but I’ve calmed down,” I assured them. “I just need some time alone to think. This is your own personal time, so spend it wisely.”

“Very well,” Nadia said, relenting. “Call us if you need anything.”

“We’ll be here.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

I was being a little cold, but they seemed to understand and returned to where they were. After several deep breaths, I looked back down at the book.

“Wait. Hold on.” I flipped through the pages frantically. The book had told me that the Sorcerer’s Guild stood at the city’s center, with the town encircling it. “Where’s the fountain?”

I picked up the pamphlet again and scanned through it, and just as expected, there was a fountain in the central garden.

“It’s all here,” I murmured. “Then that feeling I had was...”

The pieces clicked together inside my head, and finally I understood. Just then, Olford reappeared.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t find a single volume about retrieving lost jobs or magic of any kind.”

“Olford, I need to ask you something,” I stated.

The guildmaster blinked in surprise at my blunt request. “Y-Yes?”

“Assuming the twin dragons spoken of in the guidebook do exist, if they were to be reincarnated, would that cause Neldahl to fall?”

“Ah, you mean the Eternal Dragons. I would have to say no. The levitation magic is inscribed in runes all around the city, so even if the dragons were to fall, Neldahl would not.”

Good. That was the worst-case scenario averted. There was just one more piece to the puzzle.

“Next, do you happen to have any sort of spell or magic item capable of undoing curses, say, on the scale of the Wicked One?”

“Such a thing does not exist,” Olford replied. His expression didn’t change, but the look of scrutiny in his eyes was palpable. “Are you involving yourself in dangerous business, boy?”

“Poor choice of words,” I corrected myself in a hurry. “What I mean is, I want to know if you have any way of freeing someone the Wicked One may have bound.”

“I see. No, I don’t see how that would be possible. Not without a hefty price, at any rate.”

Well, it was worth a shot. The Wicked One was a god, after all.

“For the sake of argument, say the Eternal Dragons were real and I could have healed their wounds when I was a healer. Would a potion exist that could achieve a similar effect? Anything rumored or passed down in legends, maybe?” I was praying for an elixir, a soma, an amrita, anything. Some kind of miracle medicine.

“I suppose it’s never been tested. As you say, no one knows if the Eternal Dragons even exist,” Olford said. “You’re flustered from the dramatic changes you’ve been going through. I think you ought to put the theories and hypotheticals aside and start studying.”

“I know,” I admitted. “I just can’t help but wonder if there’s some kind of medicine or method that might get my powers back.”

“First, stay calm. Her Holiness informed me that you’ve come into possession of quite a few magical affinities. I understand the urge to seek what you’ve lost, but surely it won’t sprout legs and leave while you see to other training, will it?”

Olford appeared to be on to something, and I could tell this was his polite way of telling me to get a grip. He had a point. I was getting myself all wound up, as if my emotions were getting away from me now that my class wasn’t reining them in. I had to be more careful.

I reset my brain before I ended up saying something rude and accepted the tome Olford was offering me.

“Okay.” I surrendered. “I want to learn about the other affinities.”

I had to start with the tasks directly before me. And right now, that was making use of this visit to study magic. I could research and dig through the shelves in the meantime.

“I think that would be best,” he replied, smiling widely. “Then let us begin.”

Maybe one day I would come to understand why he was so adamant about me studying and training in different fields of magic. Today was not that day, but I opened the book and began reading regardless.

03 — Magical Malfunction and Secrets

Olford selected many simple books on magic for me to read. Staring deep into my eyes, he told me the affinities slumbering within me were holy, fire, earth, and thunder. I'd gone and talked up my theory about him not having an appraisal skill, but it turned out he really did have one, which was embarrassing. But I still believed there was something more to it.

Anyway, my four affinities conveniently overlapped with the dragons' blessings I currently had. I certainly hadn't possessed any other affinities before, so the connection was obvious. The effect of my spirit blessings was yet to be seen, though.

"There are three steps to spellcasting," Olford explained, noticing my concentration on the book slipping. "The chant, inner visualization, followed by the manipulation of one's mana beyond the body."

As it happened, that was the same process I'd figured out on my own while learning the Heal spell for the first time.

"I read something similar in a novice grimoire at a Healer's Guild," I said.

"I should hope so. It's the basis of all magic. One might even alter the chant depending on the image of the spell in his or her mind."

"Like with free casting or short casting."

"Precisely," Olford said. "The image *can* be a crutch, but it is vital. The chant exists to assist in visualization."

"And that can vary, like how everyone learns differently."

"Learn it well enough and you can cast spells on a whim. You would do well to study the fundamentals during your time in Neldahl."

"Right!"

When the lesson was over, I had Olford look into the sisters' potential affinities as well. I felt that having people to learn and discuss things with would help keep me motivated. According to his readings, Nadia had the thunder,

water, and wind affinities, while Lydia had those same affinities, plus earth. For some reason, this seemed to make Olford much more excited than he had been about me, and he enthusiastically offered to teach them as well, which I agreed to.

What awaited us, however, was a tiring “lecture” where we simply read textbooks out loud. What I wanted was to learn some magic, but instead, I was struggling to keep my eyes open over recitations of long passages of text.

“I’ve already memorized all the chants for the low-level spells of my affinities,” I said impatiently. “Is there anywhere we might be able to get some hands-on practice?”

Olford grunted. “Perhaps that would be a good idea. Very well. Let’s move to the training hall.”

“Oh, good, you have one of those.”

“It is equipped with magically self-repairing walls that no stray spell could ever hope to destroy. They’ve stood the test of time since Neldahl’s founding.”

His wide grin did little to assuage the worries that had been looming in the back of my mind all day. The hardback book had told of dragons, and after hearing about magical, self-healing walls, I was beginning to suspect that Neldahl had labyrinthian origins, but I ultimately decided I shouldn’t think about it. The list of questions Lord Reinstar had to answer was growing fast.

“Then let’s get going,” I said. I didn’t mention my theory because I knew the moment I put it into words, I’d never be able to stop thinking about the Wicked One and his dungeons.

Still, though, my mind turned as Olford guided us out of the archive and through the halls. Nadia and Lydia, having been nobility, would have known their aptitude for magic, yet I had only ever seen Lydia use spells (and even those came from her spirits). Perhaps one’s class had something to do with the kind of magic one could cast, not just one’s affinities. Or what if the results of one’s coming-of-age ceremony could actually cause certain skills to become *weaker*?

The sound of feet tapping on the floor pulled me from my thoughts. About a

minute away from the archive, we arrived at a door. Olford opened it and we entered. Aside from the lack of ambient miasma, the room was filled with the same kind of intimidating presence as the boss rooms I was so familiar with.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” the old man remarked. “Here, you can cast as you please without fear of breaking anything.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “We’ll get started and see what kind of magic we can put out.”

And so our training began. Unfortunately, I had little luck, but that was how it had been when I was learning Heal for the first time. So I tried to frame the process in an enjoyable way as I had back then. I had the affinities, so surely I’d get a spell or two out before long.

Oh, how naive I was. I tried every single novice spell I had learned for every one of my affinities—normal casting, short casting, free casting, magic circle casting—and even different chants to absolutely no avail. The Illusion Staff absorbed my magic and even glowed as it usually did before spellcasting, but no spell was ever cast. When I tried it without the staff, I couldn’t feel *any* sort of mana leave my body.

“The staff took my mana, so I thought that was the problem, but I’m not getting *anything*,” I murmured.

I took the staff out again and tried casting Torch, a novice fire magic spell, and it glowed scarlet...but no spell. According to my status screen, I was spending MP. Hopeful after that discovery, I checked Assess Mastery next, but I hadn’t gained a single experience point in anything.

I had only just started, but this seemed like the sort of problem I couldn’t solve on my own. After some wavering, I decided to consult our instructor.

“Olford,” I said, “when I try casting a spell, my staff absorbs the mana and glows, but I can’t get anything to happen. Do you have any idea what I’m doing wrong?”

“You’re certainly manipulating the energy within you well enough, and your control is precise too,” he replied. He frowned, tilting his head. “I’ve never seen a case like this before.”

I'd been hoping for something a little more optimistic. I knew I couldn't expect him to solve everything for me, but I was getting frustrated and wanted an answer. And in the process, I'd overestimated the extent of those all-seeing eyes of his, which were still bothering me and making it hard to concentrate on top of everything else.

But Olford said nothing more, turning instead to Nadia and Lydia. As if I had just been written off as talentless.

"I still have three questions," I said to him, getting anxious. "Er, maybe more."

"I'll answer what I can." He smiled widely, as if excited by my curiosity, and offered me his attention again.

"First, is there any kind of magic that can heal other than holy magic?" I asked.

"Ah, yes. Light magic in particular is quite versatile. Its range of spells covers offensive, support, *and* healing roles."

"Light," I repeated. "That affinity's limited to only a few jobs, though, isn't it? Like Hero."

Not that I would turn the option down, but the blessing of the Spirit of Dawn I'd received from Forêt Noire didn't offer me that affinity. I would probably need the Radiance Dragon's blessing, and I had no idea where it even was. As convenient as it would have been, I had to consider other types of magic for healing. But that endeavor wasn't looking very promising.

"You're well-informed but *misinformed*, I'm afraid. True, very few are blessed with light magic, but it is by no means anyone's exclusive property." He was certainly passionate. No wonder he was the guildmaster. "And records show that possessing multiple affinities is rather common as well. Though certainly not on the level of omni-wielding heroes, many people can cast a variety of spells from various branches of sorcery."

Relieved by his openness, I decided to just lay out all of my questions at once.

"Would it be at all possible to kind of replicate holy magic with other affinities?" I asked.

“Replicate it, you say? Perhaps with a combination of light, water, and air magic. Of course, this is assuming you can cast the spells at all.”

True enough. My current slump put an unceremonious end to that idea. I preferred to just get my holy magic back if I had to jump through hoops to heal myself either way.

“Have there been any cases in the past of people losing and regaining their magic abilities?”

Olford shook his head, touching his beard. “If there have, the records disappeared with the nation of magicians that fell two hundred years ago, its research lost to time.”

Of course. That would have been too easy.

“That figures,” I said. “Next question: could my trouble with casting spells have something to do with my class?”

“No, I don’t believe so. The most a conflict of job might affect would be mana costs.”

The elderly man looked confident. That meant I really was missing something. There was a piece of the puzzle I didn’t have, or it was related to how I’d earned the affinities through unorthodox means—that is, the blessings.

So much was rushing through my head, and the solution had to be in that archive. I just had to find the right book. There was no time to rest.

“I have one last question,” I said. “This training area looks a lot like the bottommost chamber of a labyrinth. Do you know why that is?”

Olford’s brow furrowed ever so slightly. “That, I cannot say for certain.” His friendly smile returned a second later. “I suppose it’s possible that labyrinths were the model for its construction.”

“Right. How many of these are there, by the way?”

“Three, I believe. Why do you ask?”

“We’ll be here for a while doing research and I figure we won’t have access to every training area every single day, so I was curious.”

If there were more of these places, one of them could have a door leading to an Eternal Dragon. He didn't need to know that, though.

"I do encourage curiosity," Olford said. "Your guild pamphlet will grant you access just about everywhere, so keep it handy."

"Thank you. I'll come talk with you again if I have any more questions."

For now, the majority of my time needed to be spent studying in the archive, and magic training could happen in between. I also needed to visit that fountain Lord Reinstar had spoken of at some point.

I told the sisters to feel free to direct their questions to Olford, then resumed my vain attempts to get even a *poof* of magic out.

04 — Rumors of the Past

Several hours later, I still had more than enough MP to spare but nothing to use it on. I was the only one to fail to produce any magic. The one thing I had managed to accomplish (if you could call it an accomplishment) was suffusing my mana like a light fog using the same technique as Physical Enhancement to circulate it at high speeds. But between that and infusing the Illusion Staff with my mana, I still wasn't sure which one would put me on the right track.

Lydia's magic was still spirit-aspected, granted, but at least it was magic. She and her sister had gone through quite a few potions during our training, while Olford simply watched from afar. He wasn't distracting, really, though I would have appreciated some pointers.

I had just turned to shoot him a glance when he said, "A moment, please."

"Yes?" I replied. He looked serious for once, so I got my hopes up for a bit of actual teaching. Those hopes were betrayed, however.

"It's well past midday, so I suggest we all fill our bellies, then I'll show you to your rooms."

"Oh. Right."

I'd been so focused on magic that I had completely forgotten we'd need beds to sleep in. It felt like losing my healer job had given me tunnel vision, and it was causing trouble for Lydia and Nadia.

Checking Assess Mastery, I confirmed yet again that all this had been a glorious waste of time. My face heated up in frustration and anger. All of a sudden, I didn't feel like listening to the man who had done nothing but gawk at us for the past several hours. Yeah, he didn't *have* to do anything else—he had no obligation to teach me anything—but this entire situation made it difficult for me to see anything but negativity.

I was conscious of that, but I couldn't stop myself from speaking my mind at least once.

"Honestly, I'd rather practice a little longer," I said.

“You’ll gain nothing from overworking yourself,” Olford replied. “Come.”

With that, he headed towards the door. I froze. This blithe old man wasn’t at all like Brod or Lionel, and this wasn’t the harsh and thorough way I’d become accustomed to being taught. Nadia and Lydia, who had experienced the same brand of training as I, wore similarly dumbfounded expressions. They turned to me.

“Sir?” said Nadia.

“What do we do?” Lydia asked.

As I regarded them, I realized that without their presence, I probably would have snapped. I’d have ignored the guildmaster and returned to my training or gone to the archive to study. But I couldn’t act like a child in front of them.

“We probably won’t achieve anything by banging our heads against a wall, and we’ll have to keep studying later, so I guess we’ll go along with Olford for now,” I said. “This is coming late, but we’re going to be around each other a lot from now on. Thank you for being here and for helping me.”

The girls looked surprised for a moment before exchanging glances and smiling. “The feeling is mutual,” they replied.

I nodded and followed Olford out of the training hall.

Once we had caught up to him, I pulled out the guild pamphlet from the magic bag and scanned the map for our current location. According to it, the Sorcerer’s Guild was equipped with every facility needed to accommodate everyday life. I noted a fountain at the center and the reception desk where I had met Olford just a short distance away. The map was divided into north, south, east, and west sections, and it even included the rooms and garden we’d arrived at, though none of it looked exactly to scale. We would have to be careful not to get lost.

Our living quarters and dining hall seemed to be in the west wing. To the east were shops, libraries, and magic archives, while the north appeared to be occupied by lecture halls. Strangely, though, the map was clearly incomplete. Several portions of it were conspicuously blank, including the training hall we’d

just been in. For some reason, the space listed general precautionary notes regarding Neldahl instead. For example: only authorized guild personnel were allowed to take the stairs on either side of the reception desk, and trespassing would result in a fine, but there was no way to know that unless you had purchased the guide. It didn't even say who was in charge of said fines in the first place.

The longer I looked at the pamphlet, the more questions I had. I couldn't even ask Olford because I was way too busy trying to map out the halls in my mind. I was used to getting a feel for new locations due to the nature of my career in my past life, but I wanted a more personalized map of my own, considering the unreliability of the one we already had. Soon enough, just to prove me right, we came to a set of stairs that did not exist according to the pamphlet.

Olford stopped in front of them and turned around. "This is where things get a little confusing, so don't get lost now."

"Yeah, none of this is even on the map," I said. "Where does it lead?"

"The living quarters and research facilities for every country. The map doesn't depict these areas because every nation has a different entrance."

"I see," I replied, a little disappointed.

This system was probably meant to prevent countries from interfering and squabbling with each other, but it was an awfully underwhelming method. I had expected something a little more inspired from Lord Reinstar, like some kind of retina or mana identification technology. To be fair, though, the guy was dead, so I couldn't exactly complain to him.

"Beyond here is where research into magic items and more takes place," Olford explained as he climbed the stairs. "The more...volatile research takes place underground."

"Why's that?"

"So they can be isolated or ejected in case of emergency, although that's only in extreme cases. Our protections are simply more effective the deeper underground you are."

According to him, projects were investigated every ten days, and any that

were edging too close to forbidden topics were immediately expunged. He didn't tell me exactly how. The farther we went down the convoluted corridors towards the dining hall, the more anxious I became.

"Why is this place so empty?" I asked.

Every country had their own area, true, but I hadn't seen a single person other than Olford and the receptionist since we had arrived. Given how vast the guildhall was, it was strange that we hadn't come across even one other staff member.

"Oh, we're just taking the ol' less-trodden path. You'd rather keep things discreet, I assume."

Had he cleared out the place beforehand? How thoughtful.

"I had no idea. I greatly appreciate you going out of your way to do that."

Olford chuckled. "Just a little joke. This entire floor is for Shurule's exclusive use, but it's been empty for decades now. We stopped staffing the area some time ago."

"Makes sense. You wouldn't hire people to maintain something no one uses, after all."

Ignoring Olford's poor attempt at humor, I was worried about something new now. Man-made things typically didn't last very long against the elements without ongoing maintenance, and if this place had been all but abandoned for decades, how was it going to look? It wouldn't have been such a problem if I could use cleansing magic, of course.

Still, Shurule hadn't occupied Neldahl for *decades*? The country didn't seem underdeveloped or anything, unless other nations were hiding their technological advancements.

"Oh, the stern lecture Her Holiness subjected me to at the time," Olford said nostalgically, staring off into the distance.

I sympathized. "Yikes..."

The dining hall finally came into view. The interior was filled with enough tables and chairs for thirty-odd people, almost like a cafeteria, and the high

ceilings made it seem even bigger. The kitchen was surrounded by glass, providing a clear view of whoever would be cooking inside.

Olford looked at us with a slightly awkward expression.

“This is all for us?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered slowly. “It’s fully equipped with cooking appliances, utensils, and ingredients.”

So why the awkwardness? “Is there something wrong? If we can help, we’ll be glad to.”

“Well, you see, our staff is a little short on cooks.”

Ah, so they had no one to cook for us—an easy issue to solve despite Olford’s nervousness.

“As long as there are ingredients, we’ll manage,” I assured him.

“That is a relief to hear.”

“I’m curious, though. Did something happen with Shurule in the past?”

I had expressed an interest in visiting Neldahl long before losing my magic, and yet in all that time there had been no apparent effort made to restaff the area. There had to be some kind of reason for it.

“I didn’t expect you to realize so soon,” Olford said, sighing.

“I figured Neldahl had a low population, but that doesn’t seem like the whole story.” Plus, when was the last time I’d gone somewhere and trouble *wasn’t* waiting for me? Never. The answer was never.

“It’s an old story. The Republic of Saint Shurule was the birthplace of the Healer’s Guild, but there were rumors of bad blood between our guild and yours.”

“Why? Lord Reinstar founded both Neldahl *and* Shurule.”

“Indeed, but those who believed the rumors latched on to them, and even after the bedlam died down, the damage had been done. Neldahl’s Shurulian visitors and residents gradually shrank.”

The timeline made sense. About half a century ago, a labyrinth had appeared

directly below Church HQ, and Shurule stopped being able to send as many people to Neldahl, so the rumors had taken on a bit of truth. That labyrinth had caused no end of trouble for the Church. And if something had caused the Sorcerer's Guild staff assigned to Shurule any misfortune on top of it, it would be hard to get anyone else back on the job.

"Did anything happen to the people who were assigned here?" I asked.

"Yes, as you've no doubt guessed. There were cases of malpractice, injuries, and a string of promotion exam failures."

"Talk about bad timing."

Olford nodded deeply. Shurule, at its peak, had commanded a force of skilled templars and paladins, many of them capable of wielding not only holy magic, but a variety of spells. To many, such power posed a threat, so it wouldn't have surprised me if a country had tried to shift the political balance in the past.

Coincidentally, the Healer's Guild in Yenice had been withdrawn around the same time as the drama with Neldahl, almost as if someone were deliberately trying to make a fool of Shurule on the world stage. Perhaps this hidden actor had only been aiming to prod the hornet's nest, but their timing couldn't have been worse, and things had dominoed into the state the nation was in now. It wasn't a far-fetched theory. What scared me most was the possibility that *everything* was part of some master plan.

Whatever the case, I prayed that our current era was one of goodwill.

"I wish I could have done something," Olford lamented.

"I'm sure you would have if you could have," I said. "It's not like the pope can just take a day trip up here."

"I'd like to believe your presence is the opportunity I need to make changes."

"As long as it's discreet."

"Right. Discreet."

This issue was too complicated for me. Half a century of silence? If I were on the guild staff, I wouldn't want to work with Shurule either. Once I got my magic back, maybe I could play PR and fix things up a little.

“So, we cook our own food?” I asked, shifting gears from the depressing subject.

“That would be best. As I said, there are ingredients, though they are as old as the last Shurulian to visit us. The storage *is* time-suspended like a magic bag, however, so you should find everything acceptable.”

That “should” part was an awfully ominous way of putting it. But if there were over fifty-year-old foodstuffs in there, I could imagine Gulgar or Grantz losing their minds over it.

“What do you guys think?” I asked the sisters.

“As long as we have ingredients to use, we can try,” Nadia said.

“Yes! We will try!” Lydia added.

They were motivated, at least, but cooking would take some time. Not that they didn’t know how—they’d been excellent in the labyrinth. It would just take quite a while. And I wasn’t feeling confident after Olford’s “should find everything okay” comment. Without holy magic to clean it, I wasn’t going to risk using their stock. There was plenty of simple stuff I could make from my own recipe lists, but I just wasn’t feeling it. In other words, our options were limited.

“I’m already hungry and we’ve got food in the magic bag, so let’s go with leftovers for now,” I decided. “We’ll cook tonight or something.”

I walked over to a nearby table and began to plate premade food from my magic bag. Nadia and Lydia nodded, seemingly in intense relief.

“Oh, you’ve prepared a feast, I see,” Olford commented, eyeing the dishes hungrily.

“Are you...joining us?” I asked.

“Don’t mind if I do!”

As I should have expected from a guildmaster, the old man wasn’t just kindly, but rather bold as well.

After an uneventful lunch, we headed for Shurule’s living quarters.

“This area is still regularly cleaned, so although you may find a few

inconveniences, sanitation should be no issue. Simply let us know if you have any trouble,” Olford explained. “Ah, and the rooms are separated by gender.”

“Why did you look at me when you said that?” I asked pointedly.

“On with the tour!”

His smug, teasing smile kind of irritated me. He didn’t need to worry about me, even without my healer class dulling my “urges.” Why? Because I was a spineless loser. Anyway...

“If no one’s stayed here in so long, won’t the bedding be worn?”

“We change everything out as needed, so not to worry.”

“I see.” So they were still keeping the Shurule area up to code.

“Here is our first stop.”

“It’s like a hotel,” I remarked.

Olford opened the door. The room was spacious, complete with a kitchen, dining room, living area, and more space than a two-bedroom apartment. It seemed able to accommodate more than one person.

“This is even bigger than my room at the Church,” I said.

“I’m glad you like it. The ladies can take the next room over. It’s just the same as this one. Now, that concludes our little tour of the Sorcerer’s Guild.”

“Thank you. Where should we go if we want to leave? I’d like to see the town outside at some point.”

The guildmaster grunted. “Yes, I understand. I will guide you on your first visit. Nelds can be a rather...difficult bunch, and first-time visitors aren’t always treated kindly.”

“Then let me know when would be good for you. You’ll probably find us in either the training hall or the archive.”

Olford nodded and started on his way before turning around. “Don’t forget the honey!”

With those parting words, he headed off. I waited until I couldn’t see him anymore, then addressed the sisters.

“Like I said, most of our time’s probably going to be spent between one of the archives and the training hall. They’ll most likely have people watching us, and Olford can transform, so there probably won’t be much room to let our guard down.”

“Should we consider countermeasures?” Nadia asked.

“Unknown magic can certainly be difficult to deal with,” said Lydia.

I supposed it was a good thing they were so serious about it, even though I had only brought them as a formality. Most of their time would be their own, and I did want them to make use of it.

“There aren’t a lot of people here, so gathering intel won’t do us much good,” I said. “You two can pretty much spend your time however you want.”

“Understood,” they replied.

“Also, once we’re a little more established, I want to investigate the fountain in the central courtyard. I don’t know if things’ll get violent, but be ready in case they do.”

“Yes, sir.”

The two never questioned me, which was great and all, but now it felt awkward to just kind of retire to our rooms in silence. I figured we’d make use of the time and return to the magic archive instead.

As we walked, I searched my brain for a topic, *any* topic, to end the awkward silence. Failing at that, I picked up the pace in hopes of finding a worthy subject in the archive instead.

05 — Values

The door to the archive was closed, but presenting the pamphlet opened it up. The pass worked as intended. I had to give credit to Monsieur Luck for urging me to buy it.

Praying that my search would prove fruitful for once, I decided I might as well start with whatever caught my eye. And that was my first problem: nothing did. None of the titles stood out to me, and simply browsing them was enough to eventually exhaust me.

“I’d really like to see something unique in this ‘archive,’” I murmured. “I still don’t know why it’s called that.”

As I scanned a shelf in the magic section, I came upon a frustrating number of volumes entirely unrelated to magic of any form, with titles from *The Right Way to Make Tea* to *One Hundred Tips for Gardening* to *You Won’t Believe What These Rocks Can Do!* Very few had anything to do with spellcasting. The ones I did find, though—*A Beginner’s Course in Magic*, *Adventuring as a Novice Mage*, and *Learning Magic the Fun Way*—I made sure to set aside. Most of the selections seemed to be manuals or grimoires for specific affinities. I did find a journal that was a compilation of various research papers, but it seemed to be more for show than anything else.

I was going to have to skim scientific theses if I wanted to find something of substance, wasn’t I? I scanned the room and sighed heavily. Olford didn’t seem hostile or antagonistic, but he certainly hadn’t been very helpful either. Perhaps he was trying to tell us to slow down.

“Depends on how you look at it, I guess,” I muttered.

At the end of the day, I was the one who had wanted to come here. And even if there wasn’t a single solution to my predicament in this entire collection, I wouldn’t know unless I tried to find it.

“I’m sure you’ll find something, sir.”

“She’s right. Look at all these books. One of them has to have something useful. Even without Mister Olford’s guidance, I know you’ll figure it out.”

I'd completely forgotten the sisters were there. I was grateful for their comfort, though a little embarrassed about them overhearing me brooding.

"Thank you, guys," I said. "Olford aside, I'll do my best with what I have."

"Right," they said.

I didn't want them to think poorly of Olford because of my own bias. I really had to get my emotions under control.

"I know I'm getting myself worked up about regaining my magic as fast as possible," I admitted. "Anyway, does anything about the city stand out to either of you?"

Nadia frowned. "Nothing in particular. But I do think this kind of life—studying in the archive, practicing magic—doesn't seem too bad."

"It's easy to focus without the fear of monster attacks," Lydia concurred.

"That's a positive way of looking at it. Makes me feel a little better."

"I'm glad," Nadia said. "But that should be nothing new to you, sir. After all, you're the one who taught us how to think like this. Back during our training in the labyrinth."

Lydia smiled and nodded. "Nothing is for naught," she said as if quoting someone. "The best shortcut to success is no shortcut."

I raised an eyebrow in confusion. I didn't recall ever saying anything like that. And I wasn't the one who had even trained them. "Did I say that?"

I must have been looking at them like they were crazy, but they smiled at me.

"No, you didn't. You showed it," Nadia said. "You taught us in the way you sparred with Mister Brod and Mister Lionel, in the way you never backed down or gave up against any monster, no matter the odds."

"The skills you learned and displayed aren't things anyone can obtain overnight, much less a non-combat class like a healer," Lydia added. "So when I look at all these books, that's what I think of. We may not find it immediately, but one of them has the answer we're looking for."

Was I being supported right now? I had the sneaking suspicion that I was

being cherished as a person. Perhaps unintentionally, their words validated me. They made me feel like the life I'd led so far hadn't been a series of mistakes.

I thought back on it all, on the things that made me who I was. Every time I had struggled to see the light at the end of the tunnel, every time I had felt like running away, I had gritted my teeth and pressed on, step by agonizing step. And eventually, it had taken me to a better place. All I could do was try my best, and when I did, the light would come. If it didn't, my friends would, and they would support me.

If this was one of those times, it was time to start taking those agonizing steps. I was still flustered and unsure, but I could at least trust in the words of those who believed in me.

I wanted to show my appreciation in a bigger way, but the embarrassment got to me and I only managed to squeak out a small, "Thanks."

I'd been fine all day, but suddenly, I felt like I'd regressed to puberty. Not in the scared-of-the-opposite-sex way, but in the awkward-around-family way, if that made sense.

"We'll help however we can," Nadia reassured me. "Just think of it as more training."

"You've stood up to the Wicked One! We can definitely handle a library!" Lydia cheered.

It was strange. For some reason, behind their smiles, I could almost see the faces of all the people who had been there for me in this life.

"Thank you," I said. "I think I'll take you up on that."

"Yes, sir!" they replied.

As simple a conversation as it was, I was a simple man, and my confidence had returned. With their help, we started the hunt for some primary sources to begin our research.

Nadia researched magical affinities while Lydia dug through chants. Meanwhile, I searched for any text I could get my hands on that touched on mana or the constitution of magic. We all noted the most important or curious

points we found on parchment and compared our findings every now and then during breaks.

We worked in silence, and many if not most of the books we read ended up either useless or filled with sloppy handwriting that none of us could decipher. I had learned the local tongue before coming to this world, but not even I could make out some of the scribbles on the papers we poured through. A large part of me was frustrated that nothing seemed standardized, but the rational side remembered that there were no computers, no auto-correct, nor even typewriters in this world. All I was left with was the question of why Lord Reinstar hadn't bothered to invent them when he'd had the chance.

Despite my burst of motivation, my eyes couldn't keep up, and they were starting to hurt from the unfamiliar activity (that being reading, of course). I found myself wanting not for eye drops, but a cast of Heal. Magic had pretty much become part and parcel of my everyday life.

"There's got to be a clue somewhere," I murmured.

And then, my eyes stopped on a single book, its title seeming to literally pop out at me. Pulling it from its shelf and skimming a bit, I saw that it was a collection of research dissertations theorizing that mana was not a means through which to create magic, but merely a way to tap into one's strength. By circulating it throughout the body, one could actually increase one's stats, not just enhance the body itself (à la Physical Enhancement). However, the documents noted that the abnormal nature of such a technique would likely make it dangerous for any normal human to make frequent use of.

"Well, too late for that," I muttered. "But now I know not to mess with Physical Enhancement while I can't heal myself."

I read on, not expecting much but hopeful regardless. I was desperate for *something* to pour all this drive into, and thankfully, Monsieur Luck answered my wishes.

Near the end of the book, I found several well-documented studies. The one that piqued my curiosity the most was about the use of ambient mana as opposed to bodily mana. The experiments were conducted with the objective of replicating the spirit magic that many elves and dwarves could use, which I

found quite interesting, but without the help of the spirits themselves, I didn't have high hopes for their success.

I turned the page. There, the conclusions of various trials were noted with increasingly grim vocabulary—failure, loss of subject, spontaneous combustion. Surprisingly enough, though, exactly one of the trials seemed to have succeeded. According to the recorded method, this experiment had been conducted with a profuse amount of purified magic stones, from which mana had been extracted and diffused into a sterile environment until the energy in the air itself was visible.

“The resulting trial concluded with the successful manipulation of ambient mana,” I read aloud. “The replication of spirit magic, however, proved impossible, as was the use of Physical Enhancement.’ Wait...”

The study's conclusion ended with the underwhelming statement that ambient mana manipulation was likely dependent on one's Magic Control level. There was, however, a comment and some remarks section at the very end, where a researcher discussed possible future experimentation in manipulating *another person's* mana to generate spells of affinities that the targeted individual would otherwise not be able to cast.

“Invoking affinities in people who don't have them,” I said to myself. “In theory, it sounds like a magic item.”

I was engrossed in just how detailed everything was, and I was itching to read more, but no matter how much I scoured the archive's shelves, I failed to find a second volume.

“I wonder what made them stop.”

Their hypotheses were interesting, but they had produced an admittedly large number of failures, and acquiring enough magic stones to make the air literally visible with mana couldn't have been cheap. Thanks to their research, though, I was feeling inspired.

Lionel and my master probably felt responsible for the loss of my holy magic. Thinking about them kept the fire lit under me. The answer was here somewhere. I just had to find it. Meaning there was only one thing left to do: pray to Monsieur Luck and start grabbing every single text off the shelves that

even remotely caught my attention. And that's exactly what I did.

"Um, Mister Luciel?" Nadia said. "That's an awful lot of books."

I turned to her, adjusting my grip on the mountain of texts in my hands. "I suppose it is." I laughed awkwardly, trying to hide the fact that I had literally just snatched up everything at random.

"Can you read all that today? And some of those don't look related to magic at all."

"Let's go for a walk," Lydia suggested. "I think we could use a change of pace."

I must have looked like a madman to them. Come to think of it, we hadn't known each other for very long, and the time we *had* spent together consisted mostly of training in a labyrinth. It was no wonder we were a little out of sync. I really didn't have any idea who they were as people, yet I'd dragged them all the way to Neldahl with me.

"So, I found some interesting papers earlier," I explained. "The title jumped out at me, I read it, and it turned out to be a good call."

"And you gathered those books because their titles popped out at you in the same way," Nadia surmised.

"I still think that's an absurd amount," said Lydia.

"Sure, but you can't judge a book by its cover, so I'm just grabbing everything that catches my eye."

The sisters gave me a peculiar look but didn't object. They were probably just glad I hadn't lost my mind. Still, they'd been doing their best to help me, but no one had come up with anything particularly eye-opening.

"I'm not really sure if I've got a lead yet. I'm just glad to have something," I said. "I probably won't be able to read it all today, I'll grant you that. But I have a feeling I should give it a shot."

Allowing myself to think logically, this really was overkill. The belated embarrassment started to make my face burn.

"I wonder if it's some kind of skill you've learned," Nadia wondered. "I've yet to come up with much of anything."

“Same here,” added Lydia.

The two looked exhausted. They must have been working hard.

“Maybe we should take a break. Head back to the room to eat?” I offered.

“Do we have any plans for dinner, sir?” Lydia asked hesitantly.

Oh, right. We did not. We hadn’t inspected the food stock yet, so it looked like it was going to be leftovers again.

“We’ve still got plenty of food in the magic bag, so let’s leave messing with the kitchen for later,” I said.

“Then I want to keep going,” she answered spiritedly. “As an arcanist, I’d like to learn how to use my magic more thoroughly, and I think I could learn more here.”

“I have a sizable mana pool, but I’d given up on the prospect of using it because of my class,” said Nadia. “If there’s a way to manage it, I want to find it.”

Their passion made me happy. “Then how about some candy?” I offered.

“Candy?” the two asked in unison, stepping into my personal space.

I leaned back in surprise. “Y-Yeah. Candy. I’ve got a lot of leftover test samples from when we were still developing honey products.”

“Yes, please!” they exclaimed. Their synchronicity was practically twin-level.

The moment the candy entered their mouths, their fatigue seemed to evaporate. The blissful smiles on their faces were contagious, and I found myself grinning too. My emotions had felt all over the place since I had technically stopped being a healer, and I was pretty sure I was wearing them on my sleeve more often than usual. The thought of how they might continue to manifest in the future was a terrifying one.

06 — Premonitions

After the break, we poured through documents and books for hours, copying down the most interesting information we came across, but we never found anything as promising as the study from earlier. By the time we finished flipping through everything, the sunlight creeping through the windows had faded, replaced by magic lanterns.

“Good work, guys. Let’s call it here and get some food,” I said.

“Yes, sir,” the girls replied.

Nadia reached her arms up and did a long stretch as Lydia plopped her head down on the table. I had collected over fifty different pieces of text, but the only ones to provide any useful details were those that had first caught my eye, and nothing ever really gave us what we were looking for. We had to painstakingly piece together relevant information, which took just as long as finding it in the first place.

“Don’t really feel like going all the way to the cafeteria, so how about we eat in my room?” I suggested.

“Yes, please,” they answered at once.

“Let’s put everything back where we found it. We’ll wanna know where everything is if we need it again.”

“I’m sure the next person would appreciate that as well,” Nadia noted.

“Being polite goes a long way,” Lydia said.

“It also keeps the trouble at bay,” I added. “Now, I think you two deserve something for helping me so much—and without a single librarian around. I’ll add some honey water to today’s dinner.”

“Then we’d better get cleaning!” said Nadia.

“Let’s go!” Lydia cheered.

I followed their example and began putting things away with a spring in my step. The two of them were awfully close, and for a pair of aristocrats, they

were unexpectedly humble. They'd given it their all for today's research, and I found it charming. Of course, the fact that they were adventurers was the least aristocratic part of them. Adventurers trained by the Lineage of the White Wolf, at that.

It struck me that I hadn't ever really met the typical "gentlewoman" type (including Lumina), but everyone had told me that Illumasia's royalty were textbook nobility. Maybe Blanche was different?

We soon finished cleaning, and I stashed away the day's notes and findings.

Today had been abnormally brain-frying, so I figured we'd make dinner a little bigger than usual. The hallways to my room were empty, and our footsteps echoed through the dim nighttime corridors a little unpleasantly, but I wasn't particularly afraid.

"You two sense that, right?"

"Yes, sir," Nadia said. "Three."

"I'm ready to cast my spirit magic at a moment's notice."

The strangers' mana flickered only faintly, but they had failed to conceal their presences, and I'd been sensing them since the moment we left the archive. From that, I could deduce that they certainly weren't fighters.

I continued walking, keeping my focus on those three presences. "Whoever they are, I don't think they're up to any good. Should we ignore them? What do you guys think?"

"We can continue as we are," Nadia said. "I'm still amazed by the fruits of our training after only a few months in a labyrinth."

"I kind of feel bad for them. They're trying so hard to stay hidden," said Lydia. "Maybe they're watching us for Olford?"

The two were calm and ready to react to anything.

"He's a guildmaster. No way he'd make it so obvious. Anyway, they're not a threat to us, so let's just ignore them for now," I said.

"Yes, sir," they replied.

All was uneventful until we entered Shurule's restricted area and noticed they were *still* following us. Without any staff or guards or anything, no one could really stop them.

Just when I was about to turn around and find out what the heck they wanted from us, one of them spoke up.

"E-Excuse me," a girl called out. "Are you Nadia and Lydia? Of the Berkeley house?"

Our three pursuers were women, two of them evidently the attendants of the one who had just spoken. They looked young—about Nadia and Lydia's age, to be precise. Perhaps they were acquaintances.



The speaker seemed to be a Blanche noble, so how was I supposed to act here? I looked at the sisters for assistance.

“You’re...Lady Elinesse of the Meinrich family,” Nadia said. “It’s been a long time.”

“It’s good to see you, Lady Elinesse,” Lydia greeted her.

Apparently, this Meinrich family was higher in status than Lydia and Nadia’s. I offered a small bow for courtesy’s sake because I figured I needed to. But the two attendants behind her promptly shot icy glares at me, only stopping when Elinesse raised her hand. It didn’t look like the first time she’d practiced the gesture.

“What brings you to Neldahl?” she asked the sisters, not even acknowledging my greeting with so much as a glance.

What was that about? Of course, she was their acquaintance, not mine, so I wouldn’t have expected her to have anything to do with me, but she’d been tailing us for some time. She surely knew that Nadia and Lydia were following *me*. Could something have been troubling her enough that they hadn’t noticed something so obvious? Or what, was there a custom that said unmarried nobles were forbidden to interact with the opposite sex? I was admittedly not the most well-studied guy in the world, so it could have been possible. But if this was part of some elitist class system, I had to watch my step.

In any case, a bit of rudeness aside, if she was in Neldahl, she was probably either a skilled mage or artificer of some kind.

“We’re here to study with Mister Luciel, the man who saved our lives,” Nadia told her.

“Also, we’ve abandoned our status as Blanche nobility, so pay us no special mind,” said Lydia. “I do have to say, though, it’s awfully rude of you not to return a greeting to one above your station, Lady Elinesse.”

The two certainly appeared to be slightly angry with the newcomers’ treatment of me. But did I really outrank foreign nobility?

Elinesse and her attendants blinked in surprise. Perhaps all the sneaking had

been an attempt to find the right time to stop us, and if they were that on edge, it must have been because they needed our help. Then again, maybe they just wanted to know what a couple of familiar faces were doing in the city. Regardless, I didn't want to start any conflicts.

Before I could intervene, though, Elinesse seemed to grasp the situation. Turning around, grabbing her attendants' arms, and telling them something before they could go off on the sisters, she took a step forward and faced me again.

"I apologize for any rudeness my ignorance might have caused," she said politely enough to make me forget the entire incident. She picked up the hem of her skirt in a graceful curtsy. "I am Elinesse Meinrich, the daughter of Ricarus von Meinrich, the earl of Blanche's northeastern territory. May I have your name?"

Her blond hair, styled in two spirals, and the way she talked reminded me a little of Elizabeth.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said in greeting. "I am Luciel, direct healer to the pope of the Republic of Saint Shurule." I offered another bow, but the moment my introduction had ended, her expression became petrified. So did her attendants'. "Is everyone okay?"

"Y-You don't mean...*that* Luciel, do you? The legend who became an S-rank healer in only a handful of years?"

"Seeing as I'm the only S-rank healer, yeah, that's me."

I was extremely conflicted about being called a legend. And I wasn't sure I wanted to know which of my many nicknames had made it over to Blanche.

"Is it true you slew a dragon?" one of her attendants asked suddenly and forcefully. "You're *the* Mister Luciel?"

"Are you visiting Neldahl to see a patient?" the other pressed me.

"No, only to study," I answered. "The pope wanted me to learn about other forms of spellcasting now that I've mastered holy magic."

Part of me was a little hopeful that they would drop the nickname Blanche

had latched on to, but I didn't hold my breath. That aside, I had to be careful not to let it slip that I couldn't actually use my holy magic right now, so I wanted to end the discussion as soon as possible. Of course, if life were that fair, I wouldn't have lost my magic in the first place.

"Oh, I have a wonderful idea!" Elinesse exclaimed. "You should join us for dinner in the dining hall!"

The rational side of me said that I needed to interact with people and make connections, but the human side of me was too exhausted from studying to feel like dealing with this girl's pomp and circumstance. Eating with strangers was already stressful, and I was dead tired on top of it.

"I'm honored to receive such an invitation from the daughter of a Blanche earl," I said.

"Wonderful! Then—"

"However, I must apologize," I interrupted. "We've only just arrived in the city today and we have a mountain of things requiring our attention. May we postpone your offer until we're a little more settled?"

Seeing her smile and cheer fade hit me pretty hard, but I remained stoic.

"Very well," the noblewoman said. "Another day, then. Nadia, Lydia, I hope we can find time to catch up some other time."

She and her attendants left us. They did so silently, as if their footsteps were being muffled by magic or some sort of device.

"Well, that's that. Let's go."

"Yes, sir," the sisters replied.

No one said a word the rest of the way to my room. Then, both girls let out heavy sighs the moment we walked through the door.

"We lived," Nadia breathed wearily. "Lady Elinesse has always been a...special person. A prodigy, if you will. Her knowledge as an artificer is well-known among the aristocracy of our homeland, and she grows more famous by the year. They sometimes call her the Brain of Blanche."

"Thankfully, we were well prepared after spending time with Lady Luminalia,

so I don't think we handled ourselves *too* terribly," Lydia said.

In other words, she was kind of a big deal. But if she was so popular, what was she doing in Neldahl instead of being back home with her adoring public? Maybe her skills weren't needed there, or perhaps she was simply required for research being conducted in the city. Regardless, I was curious about this Elinesse woman, if *Lumina* was the warm-up for interacting with her. That background could wait until after dinner, though.

"Does Blanche send all its accomplished people to Neldahl?" I asked. "Or do they pick and choose people for specific research?"

"They certainly don't send just anyone," Nadia replied. "But it's extremely odd that Lady Elinesse herself would be here."

"Then it's probably safe to assume there's something going on in Blanche." The sisters had been away from home for well over a year. Plenty of time for things to change.

"I think so," Lydia said. "I'm curious about what she's doing here, but more so why she sought us out specifically."

"Yes. I believe she was even waiting to ambush us," Nadia added.

"You mean she waited all that time for us to come out of the archive? Just to see us?" I thought for a moment. "But she let us go pretty easily. Lydia, something on your mind?"

She was frowning. "I've met Lady Elinesse once before. When my arcanist class first appeared to me. She laughed at me for having to rely on spirits to use magic. I don't like her."

At least she was over her anxiety enough to complain.

"Well, I won't ask you to be friends with her, but try to act like adults," I told them.

"Of course. I *am* an adult, after all!"

Lydia was the polar opposite of her calm and composed sister sometimes. But it was nice to have a bit of cheer for our otherwise tense group.

I flipped the switch near the door and the magic lights lit up my room. The

place sort of reminded me of a resort hotel I had stayed at in my past life, but not even that fancy place had let you dim the lights with a dial or control them remotely.

I took out a bunch of preprepared food from the magic bag, and dinner was ready in a flash. We discussed our plans as we ate.

“Tomorrow, we’ll get the food storage stuff in the cafeteria figured out,” I said. “After that, we’ll continue studying in the archive where we left off, and then we’ll hit the training hall after lunch.”

“Right...” the girls replied languidly.

That was oddly out of character for them.

“What’s wrong? Does the schedule not work for you?”

But my worry was misplaced.

“Mister Luciel, what in the world is this honey water?” Nadia demanded.

“I’m sorry, but this is *not* honey water,” Lydia stated.

They started to tremble. I was dumbfounded. I was personally not aware of any standards for honey water as a delicacy.

“Have you any idea how valuable something this *utterly delicious* is?!”

“I can practically feel magic oozing out of it! This simply can’t be honey water!”



So it was just too good. Awesome. Good to know I wasn't in trouble. Come to think of it, they had never told me about their lives in Yenice, and none of us had been allowed honey or other luxuries during our training in Grandol.

They emptied their cups, then proceeded to stare mindlessly into them.

"Do you, uh, want seconds?" I offered.

"Yes," they replied.

And so began the lecture, wherein the sisters expounded at length upon the preciousness of honey water and honey-related commodities. Based on this lesson, I learned that my sense of value was all skewed. I had just been handing the stuff out to the Valkyries as gifts because it always made them happy, but I had at least understood that scarcity equated to value. Seeing the sisters so rabid about the subject made me worry for the vespians' fate should they ever be abused. I had to do what I could to make sure they could continue to live among people.

Anyway, our first day in Neldahl had been an excessively eventful one, and only God knew what other crap would be waiting for us tomorrow. I made sure to offer a few prayers to Monsieur Luck, Sir Preme Luck, and the god of fate for good measure.

07 — Ready for More

After what felt like hours of honey lectures, Nadia and Lydia gradually regained their sanity until they at last remembered the potent emotion of shame. Once they did, they returned to their rooms with dark red faces. They'd drunk five whole cups of honey water, so I was a little concerned about their stomachs, but they seemed happy enough. At the very least, they weren't *mentally* exhausted. Moving forward, though, I probably needed to lay down some restrictions before this became an addiction.

"Never thought some water with honey in it would have the same mana-restoring properties as a mid-level potion," I murmured. "Maybe I should've negotiated with Olford a little harder." Granted, I didn't know the actual market prices, he was doing us a favor, and the bottle of it I'd given him would make a nice souvenir, so it worked out well enough.

As I washed the dishes, I took the time to admire a bit of Lord Reinstar's legacy. The kitchen was spacious and equipped with running water, both hot and cold, and the bathroom came with a toilet and bathtub fit for a five-star hotel, each being in their own separate rooms. I was starting to worry about how I'd get by without such luxuries once we left. But I really had to applaud Reinstar for it all. Seriously, hats off to the guy who understood life's golden rule: comfort is king.

After a relaxing warm bath and a cup of honey water, I dove into bed. It was so plush, I even bounced a few times. But it was still a little early to close my eyes, so I took out the notes we'd consolidated that day and started to skim through them.

Nadia had researched magical affinities, and her notes were very neat, organized, and easy to read, but there wasn't anything particularly groundbreaking. Lydia's notes covered spell chants, and there I actually discovered something interesting. According to her findings, many sources claimed that mistakes in reciting the chant would cause the cast to fail. Strangely, however, in my case, I never paid much mind to my chants; as long as I had the image in my head, my magic had always worked fine. Were chants

that vital to the spell's output? I had never looked into it before, so I'd probably have to do that once I got my powers back.

Lydia's findings produced no other notable discoveries. Had there been anything extraordinarily notable in the first place, they probably would have told me by now.

"It is still the first day, after all."

We'd just expand our knowledge slowly over time. The more resources we had, the greater our chances of a breakthrough, and any tiny bit of information could be the key we were looking for.

I looked over my own notes next. There were roughly three crucial aspects to casting magic: affinity, necessary mana, and ability to convert said mana. One first needed to possess the prerequisite affinity for a certain spell, followed by the magical energy required to cast it, and lastly one would sublimate this energy into a higher form (i.e., a spell).

In my current state, it was obvious enough that I had both the affinity and mana, so that could only mean my problem was with the conversion stage. But if I couldn't do that, how had I been able to effortlessly free cast so many spells in the past? Were there different kinds of mana conversions? Was it normal to be able to free cast spells on their very first cast as long as you had the image?

I glanced at Lydia's notes again, and under the free casting section I found a point stating that spells needed to be cast at least once before being able to free cast them without a chant. Off to the side in the remarks section, though, someone had noted that there had been cases to the contrary—people who could free cast spells they had never used before as long as they had a solid enough image in mind.

"Not enough studies to really draw a hard conclusion," I muttered. "Wait, I've invented spells before."

Literally just a few weeks ago, I'd created the Sanctuary Barrier and Sanctuary Armor spells, and yet in all my stupidity I had completely forgotten. Thinking back, I recalled that I'd resorted to it as a countermeasure against the Wicked One, and I had used Sanctuary Circle as a sort of reference to help me get the right image and chant. I remembered my first successful casts after dozens of

failures. How I'd been filled with passion for my new creation, how I'd created a crystal clear image in my head, and how I'd let the mana flow from me, out into the world, and manipulated it—converted it.

It had taken me numerous tries to get the words and vision perfect, but I'd forgotten why I had even bothered to in the first place. To be honest, I still didn't remember. I had the hazy recollection of reading somewhere that a perfect image would improve the success rate of the Revive spell, but nothing else.

"If I can get that feeling back, I bet I could become the best mage in the whole world." I cringed. "I sound like a kid."

The fatigue was getting to me, but I could dream. Although, I supposed I had to get used to deluded fantasies until I could actually cast a spell. Until then...dreamland, here I come.

At the rate we were currently going, this process was looking to take a long time, and I would feel bad making Nadia and Lydia suffer through the whole thing with me. I figured I ought to let them browse and study at their leisure once in a while.

I did have a lead from that first research study, though: a magic item for casting spells. In theory, something like that would let me (or anyone, for that matter) cast holy magic with just a little mana, and if it all worked out, affinities would be a worry of the past. It wasn't the most glorious solution, but if it let me get the peaceful life I had always wanted, then it was worth a shot.

At last, I stopped fighting the weight of my drooping eyelids, and sleep took me.

The next morning, I sat up, meditated, and practiced my Magic Handling like always. Normally I would have done Magic Control as well, but seeing as I was having issues getting my mana outside my body, I skipped it this time. It felt weird to have a part of my daily routine for years go missing.

Just as I was beginning to brood, a light knock came at the door.

"Must be Nadia and Lydia," I murmured, standing up. "We never did decide

on a time to meet up.”

“Luciel!” a voice called from the other side. It was Olford. “I haven’t disturbed your sleep, have I?”

“Be right there.”

I opened the door to find him holding a stack of documents with a wide grin on his face.

“Ah, there you are! Good morning!” he greeted me.

“Good morning. What are you doing here so early?”

“Oh, just riding the wave of passion, so to speak. Seeing you three give it your all in training yesterday inspired me to be of more use. And after such high-quality honey, far *bee* it from me to sit around and do nothing!”

Olford held out a thick bundle of dozens of papers. I took it purely on instinct, and glancing down at it, saw the entire top page was crammed tight with writing. The ink still looked fresh.

“Did you write all this?” I asked. “For me?”

“With a bit of blood, sweat, and tears.”

“Wow. Thank you. Really. What is it, exactly?”

“Just a few theories, hypotheses, ruminations, you know,” he said. “Some ideas to hopefully help you all work out the mystery of your magical impotence.”

The guildmaster’s kindly smile was as bright as it had been yesterday, but at a closer look I could tell there were bags under his eyes, and his skin was slightly pale. Suddenly, it hit me that ever since I had stopped being a healer, I’d not only been coldly distancing myself from others but outright antagonizing them. In reality, Olford was one of the few people who knew of my struggle, a person the pope herself trusted, and someone I should have been relying on throughout my ordeal. Frankly, he was well within his rights to cut ties with me after how rude and dismissive I had been to him, and yet he was still helping me. I was a little ashamed of myself, but I could finally ask the question I hadn’t had the courage to ask yesterday.

“There was a reason you weren’t really teaching us anything, wasn’t there?”

“Advice and criticism is best received from a trusted party, something I was not at the time,” he said. “And the three of you didn’t quite seem to be in a trusting mood then.”

“I’m really sorry about that.”

“No, no, don’t be. I needed the time to ascertain your abilities, and I consider that goal achieved.”

The bundle he’d given me looked at least fifty pages thick. I couldn’t even imagine how long it must have taken him to write, but he couldn’t have done it all last night and gotten much sleep, if any. I should have never doubted a man chosen personally by Her Holiness.

I’d been doing a lot of “I need to” and “I should” but not taking enough action. If I couldn’t make good on my own promises, everyone would start to lose faith in me. So rather than degrading myself further, the best way I could repay Olford’s efforts was to try and make genuine use of it.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “This will be a huge help.”

“Don’t try to assimilate it all at once, now.”

“Noted. By the way, I have a question.”

“What might that be?”

“Do you think it would be possible to use a magic item to cast holy magic? Even for someone without the holy affinity?” I asked.

Magic items didn’t require affinities, after all. Only mana. I hadn’t heard of a single magic item capable of replicating holy magic, though, so my expectations were low.

“An interesting theory,” he replied. “That would certainly solve your problem, and I believe I saw a device like that being sold on the streets.”

“Then—”

“However,” Olford continued, “even if the theory were sound, creating a magic item that produces holy magic would likely prove difficult.”

“Because there are no holy-aspected magic stones? Or something else?”

If that was the only problem, I could solve it right now. Back in Yenice, Pola and Lycian had asked me to help in their experiments by imbuing purified stones with my magic, and I still had the highest quality ones in my bag.

But life was not fair.

“Both, as a matter of fact,” the old man answered. “No monster exists that drops holy-type magic stones, but even if you were to create them with holy water from the Healer’s Guild, no one has yet deciphered the runes of magic circles formed by holy magic spells.”

He had me there. Whenever I’d cast holy magic with long-range circles, the symbols and shapes on it would shift and change. I’d never bothered to even *try* to decipher them because I had never needed to.

“I thought I was on to something, but I guess not.”

“Give yourself more credit! It would be a fascinating experiment to conduct. I’d love to try my hand at inventing affinity-oriented magic items myself, with your permission. I believe your ambition might be a reality one day.”

Who was this guy and what had he done with Olford? Was this the power of honey or was he always this helpful? Either way, I was glad of the change.

Just then, the sisters emerged from their room.

“Good morning, sir. Olford,” they said in unison.

“Good morning, you two,” I said back. “Look at what Olford put together for us from yesterday’s training.”

They looked at each other before bowing to the guildmaster and saying, “Thank you very much.”

Olford gave his usual low laugh. “What can I say? I’m a sucker for spirit. And no hard feelings.” He flashed us a mischievous grin.

All I could do was smile back. I had no idea what the extent of his information network was, but it didn’t seem like we’d be hiding much from him around here.

“Do you want to have breakfast with us?” I asked. “There’ll be honey water.”

“Is the pope Shurulian, boy?”

Nadia and Lydia had warned me about being careful with the stuff, but this was thanks to someone who deserved it. And based on Olford’s reaction, it was pretty clear I’d have more success motivating him with honey than Substance X this time around.

After moving to the dining hall, I laid out plates of premade food like yesterday. I considered cooking for once, but Olford looked like he needed some nourishment sooner rather than later so that he could get to his room to rest—which he did once breakfast was over, with a belly full of honey and a smile on his face. He planned to show up at training after a nap.

“All right, let’s take a look at that pantry,” I said. “Once we’re done with that, we can read Olford’s papers at the archive, then we’ll head to the training hall in the afternoon. Sound good?”

“Yes, sir,” they responded.

Nadia looked a little troubled, though. “To think he really was just a kind old man,” she murmured.

“He never really addressed us, so I thought we’d offended him somehow,” said Lydia.

Whatever their own impressions had been, I bore some of the responsibility for having added to their distrust of him with my own comments.

“You were just doing your job to protect me, so you have nothing to feel bad about,” I reassured them. “I take full responsibility for our behavior. All I ask is that you continue bearing with me and stay on guard.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied.

We entered the kitchen, cleaned our dishes, and at last it was time to open...the pantry.

“I don’t care how suspended the time in there’s supposed to be. If the food’s *decades* old, I don’t know if I want to open it.”

I’d heard of industrial freezers with meat from half a century ago and canned

food lasting for dozens of years in my other life, but you wouldn't catch me itching to verify those claims for myself.

"I just hope it doesn't smell," Nadia moaned.

"What if we rediscover some long-lost ingredients?" Lydia wondered out loud.

They both stood in front of the door, nervous and excited in their own ways. I couldn't help but laugh at them.

"Very funny," said Nadia.

"Stop laughing and open it!" Lydia urged me.

I pulled on the heavy door, leaning back and prying it open with all my weight, and what we found inside was beyond any of our wildest expectations.

08 — Leftovers in the Pantry

“Is that...a dragon?”

Upon opening the door, we were immediately met with the face of a blue-scaled dragon. I froze in shock as Nadia unsheathed her sword and Lydia brandished her staff. Only after that did I finally draw the Illusion Sword, but just as I did, Nadia seemed to notice something and approached the beast.

“It’s dead, sir.”

Regaining my composure, I looked closer and noticed that the dragon was *floating*. As if on a cloud, adrift in the pantry. I poked my head in and saw that it was accompanied by a myriad of other monsters, all suspended in midair. My expectations coming in here had been some shelves, a few cabinets, maybe, something like an ordinary pantry, but this was downright surreal.

“I didn’t open the wrong door, did I?” I wondered out loud.

The interior was utterly dreamlike. In place of conventional lights, it was lit by stars in an all-encompassing, endless night sky. It extended in all directions, even downward, and the lack of any physical floor kept me from having the courage to step inside. To top it off, the monsters looked pretty horrifying.

“Are those all for eating?” Nadia murmured.

“What if you got trapped inside? Would you just die?” I asked.

“No, the door can’t shut while someone’s inside,” Lydia replied. “It says so on the back.”

There was a notice on the back of the door that still looked freshly written. But there was no telling how old it actually was.

“I guess it’s fine, then,” I said. “I still don’t know about this, though.”

So sue me; I was scared to walk out into space. Nadia, seeming to notice my trepidation, smiled playfully and stepped inside without hesitation.

“Hey, it might be dangerous!” I couldn’t just let her walk in there alone.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back after a quick survey of the room,” she said.

“I’ll go too,” Lydia chimed in. “You wait here just in case, sir.”

And then she followed her sister out into the void. As I watched them leave, I lamented my own cowardice. On the other hand, there was a certain saying about curiosity and cats that I’d have to teach those two once they got back.

I decided to scan the room from the outside instead of just standing around. The monsters had stolen my attention before, but now I noted a few other doors near the back.

“Where there’s a door...”

There had to be rooms. But it would be too dangerous for all of us to go at once, so I left the recon to the girls while I kept watch to make sure the entrance didn’t close. In the meantime, I took out Olford’s papers.

The odd mist I had managed to expel from my body had undoubtedly been mana, and the reason it had been visible was because there had been an overabundance. The problem was when I tried to emit it in a more controlled way, so according to the documents, something had to be blocking it.

“So that’s what it was,” I muttered. “The cloudy stuff I created using the same method as Physical Enhancement was just my mana essentially leaking out of me.”

Could maintaining that state theoretically raise someone’s magic resistance? An ability like that would have made spellcasting opponents a breeze.

But wait. If my problem was emitting mana in a controlled way, then how had I been able to imbue the Illusion Staff with it? That had to mean something. Something important.

Just then, Nadia and Lydia returned looking rather excited. They were lugging a great boar behind them.

“So, uh, what’s with the boar? And the grins?” I asked. “Actually, that thing looks a little ‘greater’ than the ones I’ve come across.”

I’d hunted and eaten one myself before, as a matter of fact. This one looked twice the size, though.

“Sir, this place is filled with monsters neither of us have ever seen before,”

said Nadia. “I thought this was a great boar too, but it’s actually a great *hog*! No one’s seen one of these for decades!”

She knew her stuff. But a hog? Not a boar? What was the difference? The only thing I knew about swine in this world was that orcs were considered part of the family.

“I’m not much of a biologist, but is it safe to assume it’s related to great boars and orcs?”

“The general belief is that the different varieties changed to adapt to different environments, though there are many theories.”

“I read in an encyclopedia once that great hogs were far more timid and less aggressive than great boars,” Lydia explained.

“I see,” I said. “I’d like to butcher it and stick it in the magic bag to cook later, but I don’t know if I want to risk it without cleansing magic.”

The two sank dejectedly. Still, I didn’t want to go turning such a clean kitchen into a murder scene without a way to clean it. In hindsight, having a second healer on the team probably would have been smart, but Jord was busy working as guildmaster of Yenice’s Healer’s Guild and there was a limit on how many could have accompanied me to Neldahl anyway.

“Let’s save it for when I can use magic again. I’m sure there’s lots of interesting stuff in there, but we should hold off for now,” I said. “I’m going to go check it out myself, so look through these papers in the meantime.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied dejectedly.

The two slumped their shoulders as I stowed the hog inside the magic bag. Magic or no magic, I preferred to save it for a master’s hands. It wasn’t like we had to devour everything we came across right away.

I stepped into the pantry and immediately felt gravity free me from its grasp. “This is...unsettling.”



The absence of solid ground beneath my feet was more discomfoting than anticipated. Just as I was wondering how they'd gotten around in here, I found myself moving easily enough.

"I move with my thoughts!" I exclaimed in surprise.

I felt a unique sense of freedom and liberation. But then I remembered that the door had already been open for a while, and that meant time was moving for everything inside while we dilly-dallied. Worrying that everything would start to spoil before too long, I hurried to one of the doors at the back.

"It really feels like I'm flying," I murmured. Even I was shocked by how much fun I was having.

I reached the first of the three doors, the rightmost one. Inside was a plethora of spices and seasonings organized neatly by variety. There was sugar, salt, red pepper, peppercorn, cooking oils, and even miso and soy sauce. A lot of it too.

"It couldn't have been one of the guild staff who made this place. I mean, not with stuff like this."

It was way too much like what you'd find in a kitchen on Earth. I took the opportunity to yolk a couple of small pots of miso and soy sauce for myself and noticed the room even had ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and mayonnaise. This place was absolutely stocked.

"It must've taken a ton of ingredients and time to make all this. But it looks pretty much untouched."

I left the implications of that unsaid as I moved to the middle room. This one appeared to be where the vegetables were kept, and it was just as absurdly loaded as the last.

"This is less a room and more a straight-up warehouse."

Combined with the monsters in the main room, there had to be enough food in this pantry to feed the entire world for at least a year. It would have taken a single family at least a century to get through it all.

Once again, Lord Reinstar impressed me with his greatness. It really seemed like he could have brought about never-ending world peace if he had cared to. I

myself had been stockpiling foodstuffs underneath Yenice in case of famine, but this was on a totally different scale. The man wasn't just a hero, he was like a god who had descended from heaven. A deity. And yet despite the pressure those expectations must have burdened him with, he had unfailingly exceeded them every step of the way. I had to wonder, had he been aware of his heroic status at the time? Was Neldahl's creation a way to distance himself from it all?

I still had plenty of vegetables from Yenice, so I only grabbed enough to sample them before leaving the room behind.

"All right, one more door."

I opened it, and awaiting me inside was a sight rivaling the moment I had opened the pantry for the first time.

"Why is there a door inside a space-pantry that leads to a jungle?"

On the other side, grass grew as high as my waist, and the entire sky was hidden behind a canopy of trees. Dhoran and Pola had created an artificial world underground back in Yenice, and Rockford was an entire town built with the same techniques, but this was something else. For starters, this was an artificial world *within* an artificial world created with spacetime magic. Doing that *once* was already grounds for godhood.

The thing I didn't understand was: Why? Why a forest in a pantry?

I couldn't turn back. The thought never even crossed my mind. I stepped inside, as if drawn by something, and my foot touched the ground. The gravity being back on was a great relief, that was for sure. Ripe fruits dangled from many of the trees.

"Why do I get the feeling someone special tended to this place?" I murmured. "Someone other than Lord Reinstar."

Nothing seemed out of place. The trees and other flora were clearly organized purposefully for optimal growth, a telltale sign that it had been the work of an elf. And given that Lord Reinstar would have been the one to create these spaces with his spacetime magic, it was easy for me to guess who might have been important enough to be a part of his work.

"Maybe I'll pick some fruit or berries to bring back for Her Holiness."

I scanned the area, and just before turning back to leave, my eyes fell on a single particular tree, clearly special and seemingly guarded by the branches of the others around it. Golden fruit hung from it, but that wasn't actually what drew me. My attention was on the smaller tree behind it.

I approached it. Clinging to a single branch was what appeared to be a pure white apple.

"There's something about this. Something more than the golden ones, for some reason."



I had no reason to think that, and on any other occasion I might have written it off. But I had the feeling that I needed this apple. It could have been poisonous, but I was resistant, and the fact that it was growing here must have meant it was edible. Or maybe I was just acting impulsively because I trusted Lord Reinstar too much.

I carefully picked the white fruit and put it in my magic bag. And then, for reasons unknown to me, I poured some of my magic into the tree itself. Something told me that I needed to.

Optimistically hoping that a bit of my mana would suffice in the absence of healing magic, I wove back through the forest and exited into the space pantry once more.

“You were gone for quite a while, sir.”

“Did you find something?”

Nadia and Lydia were waiting for me near the door. They had Olford’s papers laid out on the table and were reading them as I’d asked. All I could think about was that if it were Pola and Lycian, they’d have wandered back into the pantry without asking me. It made me a little nostalgic.

“There were rooms packed with spices and plants,” I said. “I also picked some weird white fruit.”

“You found fruit? I thought there were only vegetables and spices,” Nadia said.

“Me too,” her sister concurred.

“Oh. Huh.” Was the third door only visible to me? Crap, it probably was, knowing my track record. Great.

“Does it seem tasty?” Lydia asked.

“It looks more poisonous than anything. I have poison resistance, though, so I figured I’d take a bite. You two want any?”

“No, thank you,” they replied at once, smiling nervously.

As far as the rest of the pantry went, everything seemed to be in stock, and it was all of good quality. The decades-old provisions were safe to eat and cook with, which was one less worry on our list.

We then discussed what to make for lunch and dinner. The sisters were keen on devouring the great hog, so I searched my mind for dishes using pork, and what I came up with was ginger pork and pork miso soup. But they also had ponzu sauce so shabu-shabu sounded good too. Ultimately, I decided we'd cross that bridge when we came to it and we headed for the magic archive.

When we arrived, three women were waiting for us.

"Good morning, er...Lady Meinrich, isn't it?" I greeted her.

"Good morning to you, Sir Luciel," she responded. "Please, call me Elinesse."

"Did you need us for something?"

"Yes, in fact. We've come upon a bit of a...snag in our research, and I thought perhaps you might be able to help?"

Was it normal for people around here to just recruit folks for their projects? Either way, I was too busy.

"Help?" I repeated. "Under any other circumstance, I'd be more than willing, but as you know, we've only just arrived. I apologize, but I have to prioritize my orders from Her Holiness."

Just as I passed her by, I heard her mumble something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that," I said. "Could you repeat it?"

I wasn't going to be the center of an international incident by ignoring a foreign noble. No, sir, not me.

The girl looked up at me, blushing, the makings of tears in her eyes. "We have no money. Not even enough to enter the archive. Could you spare any coin?"

I froze in shock. They were broke? But how?

"Are you not being funded by the homeland?" Nadia asked before I could. They did share a country, after all.

"Well..." Elinesse struggled to get the words out.

“We have been in Neldahl for close to a year now,” an attendant behind her answered. She hadn’t been with Elinesse yesterday. “We’ve spent well over ten platinum in that time and thus expended our budget. Try as we might to request additional funds, our results have been less than convincing.”

That pretty much explained it. But the Brain of Blanche? Failing to produce results? What kind of research were they doing? At any rate, it seemed they were after financial assistance rather than physical aid.

“Is there anyone else from Blanche here besides you?” I asked.

“Our country is currently preoccupied with domestic territorial disputes,” the other attendant replied. “The nobles are doing everything they can to hinder each other.”

Was money that precious there? I felt bad for the poor citizens of those squabbling territories, but it did explain why Elinesse had been forced to humble herself and ask a stranger for help. Wasn’t she worried I’d take advantage of her? Nadia and Lydia probably eased her mind in that regard.

The sisters suddenly bowed to me as I considered my options. Apparently, they wanted me to help her.

“Well, we’re going into the archive to study until the afternoon anyway, so you can join us for now,” I said. “As for the financial aid, I want you to talk it over with Nadia and Lydia.”

I wasn’t lacking funds myself, and it would have benefited me in the long run, so it wasn’t exactly a hard decision, but I also didn’t want any more of my time consumed than was necessary.

“Th-Thank you so much!” Elinesse cried. “It’s no wonder they call you the Divine Healer’s Apostle!”

“The Divine Healer’s what?”

“It’s what we call you in Blanche. Her Holiness’s heart bled for her corrupt guild of healers, thus calling forth an apostle of the Divine Healer destined to become an S-rank who would lead the healers back to greatness once more! Or so the stories go.”

“Oh, do they?”

“Yes! The Apostle’s unfaltering virtue and righteous punishment of corrupt slavers and healers alike are sung to children everywhere through nursery rhymes.”

“Uh-huh...”

“You’re extolled for your valor as well! Few would have the bravery to do what you do.”

If I listened to any more of this, I was going to lose my mind. “Well, rumors are rumors. Let’s go.”

I flashed my pass at the door and hurried inside. I sensed the other five trudging behind me—and a stomachache coming on.

09 — Return to Form

Once inside the archive, I split off from the others and started pouring over Olford's documents. I quickly discovered a contradiction. If I had just been leaking mana, then why had my expended MP only been enough to account for the amount used for Physical Enhancement? I did have natural regeneration, but even with that, it should have been lower. Based on my prior experience, activating Physical Enhancement required one to circulate their inner mana, and anything that wasn't circulated would be lost. But at the time of our magic training, that had been the only MP I'd consumed. So where was the excess mana leaking out of me actually going?

I found no explanation for this incongruence, of course. Olford had been up all night writing this, after all, and if it was that easy to have an answer, we'd all be living in a better world.

The next section caught my attention. It said:

Some among us possess the ability to strike an opponent without physical contact. It is theorized that this feat is accomplished by condensing one's magical energy into a blade and launching it thereupon. Should you learn to acquire this skill, I believe it would be a powerful weapon in your arsenal in the absence of proper spellcasting.

The task, then, is finding a weapon durable and conductive enough to sustain your mana as your staff can.

I could transform my staff into the Illusion Sword, so as long as I got the theory down, I could learn to launch those energy slashes through the air too. It wasn't holy magic, but it was the best news I'd gotten so far. I had tried to copy Brod and Lionel in the labyrinth at Grandol but never figured it out. With this hypothesis, though, I had something to work from. I couldn't wait to get back to training. It felt like I was on top of the world.

As I read on, I found more detailed discussions on the topic.

“I’ll have to get Olford some extra honey,” I muttered.

The mana leaking out of me could be consolidated into a sword, and by visualizing the energy shooting outward... The more I read, the harder it got to follow as more and more technical jargon filled the pages. I quickly gave up on trying to understand it and put it off until Olford could teach me himself. Still, it was huge to finally have hope that I’d be able to protect myself again.

I noticed that I’d come here to get my holy magic back, but at some point learning to fight had gotten mixed in. Maybe I was changing more than I thought.

Smiling self-deprecatingly, I continued through the pages. But the more I read, the worse my mood became. The only requirement for changing one’s class to healer was having the holy affinity. If the job still wasn’t available to you, there was a chance you were being obstructed by some kind of hatred, and it was obscuring your desire to help people. Upon overcoming this, if the job was *still* hidden, one’s only recourse was to accept the fate ordained by Crya the Divine and the Divine Healer.

Was my desire to help people being obscured by hatred? No, it couldn’t be. I’d saved my master and Lionel, so if I were ever to see the Wicked One again, you most certainly wouldn’t catch me going for revenge. Granted, I definitely didn’t like the guy, but I’d still choose to run, and I had no regrets about what I’d done back there. I was proud of myself, even.

That would make the culprit fate—as ordained by Crya and the Divine Healer. The only other classes to wield holy magic were templar, paladin, sage, abbess, and hero. My best bet among those was sage, and I could use SP to nab any other affinities, though I still technically had holy.

Before I knew it, I’d reached the final page. There, it was written that the last sage to ever live had become a sage through the invention of God’s Lament, aka Substance X, and there had been no other appearances of that class in the last century. Olford hypothesized that something about the job must have changed.

This sage had possessed the blessings of all six spirits: light, darkness, fire, water, earth, and wind. Thankfully for me, his skill with the various magic affinities hadn’t been all that great.

“It would’ve been nice if I could’ve just trained my way there...” I murmured.

I continued to read. The sage’s final words had been the subject of much research and debate, and they were recorded thus:

“Had my work on God’s Lament been completed sooner, I would not have spent my entire life dedicated to the pursuit of sagehood.”

Somewhere, there was a tree known as the World Tree, which bloomed only once every several hundred years, and on its branches grew a golden fruit. Near it was the Tree of Fraternity that bloomed once every century, and on *its* branches hung a fruit of pure white that, upon consumption, would unlock the door to sagehood.

The white fruit was extremely poisonous, however, and one required resistance to various adverse effects in order to eat it. Conferring these resistances was the purpose of God’s Lament. However, the World Tree was nowhere to be seen, and none knew of the Tree of Fraternity’s whereabouts, so it was said that this was merely a falsehood spread by the sage in order to compel others to imbibe his creation.

When I finished reading, it felt like my head was about to explode from the information overload. The reason that freak had invented God’s Lament was for one simple purpose: to eat the white fruit and become a sage. Because that very fruit was the only way it could be done.

“Okay, hold on. Back up.”

God’s Lament was the original name for Substance X back when it had still been in pill form. Its creation hadn’t been the extraordinary feat of a sage. It had been the *means* of becoming a sage in the first place.

In other words, I’d already met the requirements. I could eat the white fruit right that second. Nearly all of my resistances were already almost level ten.

“Hell yeah!” I exclaimed.

Everyone’s gaze shot towards me. I smiled awkwardly and waved them off.

But what happened next? Had he joined the Healer’s Guild upon becoming a sage? Had he gifted the Adventurer’s Guild the endless Substance X machines

as a way to continue his legacy? The documents ended there, so I could only speculate.

This was all so sudden. Before anything, I had to investigate the fountain in the center of the Sorcerer's Guild. If Lord Reinstar was right, I'd meet the Spirit of Gales there. And then I would have to hope they'd give me their blessing and that the fruit I had really was the right one, and that it would do what it was purported to do if it was, *and* that I would actually live through the process. So I was a little apprehensive.

On the off chance it all worked out, though, I'd have holy magic again. It was a worthwhile risk. Or maybe that was my non-healer side thinking.

"Could be dangerous," I mumbled.

I didn't doubt Olford's research, but I was hesitant to take it all at face value. Would this sort of doubt for my fellow man be considered the kind of hatred that would hinder my holy magic?

But I had to be able to believe in myself more than anyone. Not just other people. As timid and cautious as I'd been, I couldn't ignore the fact that I had accomplished a lot. Through my own actions. I closed my eyes and gave myself a good hard look. I had a feeling that I had to. That I needed to really face myself before taking that step to sagehood.

The first spell I had ever learned was Heal. I'd failed a lot, and yet hard work was tangibly rewarded in this world, so with effort, I'd gone from struggling to cast piddly Heals to casting Extra Heal and Revive. Fear had been my drive. Once, I was powerless, but then I'd been given the power to heal, and through that power I had made people happy; hidden my apprehension. I had made the power my own. And I'd been blessed with kindness and friends I could trust. They'd become my new drive.

When the Spirit of Tides had told me I would one day know despair, I'd prepared myself for the eventuality that I would lose my magic. And when I really did, I'd realized the jig was up. That I had nothing to hide behind anymore. But I was okay with that as long as Brod and Lionel were safe.

In a different future, one where I hadn't prepared myself, would I have come to blame them for robbing me of my crutch? Would I have fallen back into that

pit where everyone around me was an enemy after my business? I wanted to believe I wouldn't. I'd been full of myself back then, burdened by an unfortunate series of bad events, and it had made me feel betrayed by those closest to me. I'd forced myself into a negative spiral of my own making.

Even if I could never regain my magic, it wasn't the end of the world for me. I had plenty of paths to walk in life, so I wanted to believe that I'd never find myself in that horrible state of mind again.

I took a deep breath, opened my eyes, looked up, and muttered my motto. "Hard work is the foundation of success. Luck is only opportunity, and opportunities are only grasped through effort. Everything is up to you."

A friend and coworker of mine who'd refused to abandon me at my worst had spoken those words to me. Apparently, it was a mixture of some motivational stuff an athlete had once said. Regardless, it had made me realize that there were still people who cared about me, and it had given me the push I needed to push forward. It remained my motto to this day, and although it might be a little verbose, it always got me out of my ruts.

Misfortune and luck exist in equal measure. Lady Luck is just a little shy, and she prefers people with the passion and dedication to take her by the hand when she finally does appear. Life isn't fair. Not everyone has the same opportunities, but the great equalizer is what we do with them when they arrive. Meanwhile, everyone else is trying their hardest to create chances of their own, but all you can do is try. Try your hardest and be damn confident that it's your best. That confidence is how you see the world around you and the opportunities that inhabit it.

Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes after all that, it comes to nothing, and it can be especially devastating when that happens. But you have to look back at yourself and analyze why things turned out the way they did, and then you'll be armed with that knowledge for next time.

That said, it was probably why I took some measure of pride in the blood I had shed in combat training but not in my holy magic in particular. It didn't feel like I'd shed any blood for it. So if I ate that fruit and became a sage right here and now, could I call that deserved? No. I knew I wouldn't be able to. It would

be a cop-out.

In that case, I had to use this new road map to sagehood as fuel and continue my magic studies. And only when I could truly be proud of myself would I finally take the first step.

“I need to take Olford’s advice and stay calm. I’ll use the time I’m being given to improve and better myself.”

Part of me wanted to go talk with the spirit and get it over with, but it wasn’t going anywhere. It could wait until I had some knowledge and confidence under my belt.

Just then, Nadia and Lydia came over with Elinesse in tow.

“Sir, would you be at all willing to loan Lady Elinesse the funds she needs?” Nadia asked tentatively.

“We heard her story,” Lydia said. “We don’t think we can just leave this alone.”

They wouldn’t look so earnest if it wasn’t for a good reason.

“I’ve got no problem with it, but did you say loan?” I asked. “As in, she’ll pay me back?”

I had no idea what kind of research she was doing, but I hadn’t expected that. I kind of respected her more now.

“Of course,” Elinesse stated. “I couldn’t possibly expect you to offer charity to someone you’re barely even acquainted with.”

She seemed to be surprisingly self-aware. I wouldn’t have even necessarily *wanted* her to pay me back as long as she kept to herself, but this was fine with me.

“All right, I’ll finance your research until things start taking off,” I said. “Nadia and Lydia will be our go-betweens from now on.”

“Oh, thank you so much! You’re a generous soul, great Apostle!”

I smiled awkwardly. The day was young and it had already proved vital for revealing the path ahead, and I was now brimming with a motivation to study

that was rivaled only by a student the night before an exam. I pored over book after book, thesis after thesis from the archive's shelves, and when I wasn't doing that, I was in the training hall trying anything I could to control my magic.

Meanwhile, days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months...

10 — Protection of the God of Fate

Three months passed, and in that time, I tore through the archive's contents, gradually accumulating knowledge. Nadia and Lydia, seemingly inspired by my motivation, had quickly mastered beginner spells and were now practicing casting without chants. The three of us had grown rather close as well. Not necessarily in a romantic sense, but they felt like younger sisters to me. Maybe the fact that I did all the cooking while we shared the rest of the menial chores added to that effect. I still wasn't having any luck with casting, but I'd learned to infuse the Illusion Sword with mana quite well, and although I hadn't gotten the energy slashes down yet, I wasn't disheartened.

Olford turned out to be a lot more considerate than I'd given him credit for. He wasn't the type to offer answers to questions right away. Rather, he'd come back with a full on report loaded with citations the next day. His work was a massive help to my studies, though there wasn't much I could do to thank him but offer honey.

Perhaps it was my own Swordsmanship skill holding me back. According to Olford, it was either that or a lack of some separate skill entirely preventing me from launching my mana through my blade.

Oddly enough, I'd spent the past three months rather calmly despite my initial panic. The reason for that was, quite obviously, that Neldahl was the safest place I'd ever been in the entire world. I hardly had to bother with any people, the views were gorgeous, and I had no real responsibilities. The sisters were there too, so I never felt lonely. In fact, their dedication surpassed my own, and having them around was a constant source of motivation.

And then, one day, I alone was summoned to Olford's office.

"Olford?" I called out as I entered.

"Ah, there you are. My apologies for taking time out of your studies."

He was waiting for me in the fake room, and the two of us entered the real one through the mirror. But even after we sat down, he stayed silent for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“You called me here like you had something important to tell me,” I said.

Olford grunted. “It seems time’s done great things for your training.”

That was a weird non sequitur. Had he possibly learned the trick to the energy slash technique? But if that were the case, he would have told me during practice.

“It’s thanks to you. You’re the one who gave me the chance to learn.”

“That’s great to hear. Now, the reason I brought you here...” Olford’s eyes went strangely wide. “...is the mead you’ve been hiding from me!”

“Wait, is that it?”

I hadn’t said a word about any honey alcohol in the three months I’d been here. I was bewildered. Why and how would he have learned about it *now*?

Olford smiled at me, then looked wistfully out the window. “Full moon tonight. Good for us.”

Us? Where had that come from? Was he just waxing philosophical because of the beauty? Suddenly, it hit me that the strange way he was acting was kind of familiar.

“Um, right. If it’s a drink you want, I’d be glad to offer some mead as thanks for everything you’ve done.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

That put him in a good mood, but I still couldn’t shake this feeling. Still, this was a good chance to show my appreciation, so I stopped theorizing, took out two glasses from the magic bag, and poured us some mead. A sweet scent emanated from the amber-colored liquid.

“Shall we toast?” Olford suggested.

“Why not?” I lifted my glass so as not to keep the clearly impatient man waiting. “Cheers.”

By the time I had put the rim to my lips, Olford was already done. And then came that familiar *ping* inside my head.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Spirit of Gales

“Hello?” I blurted out incredulously.

Olford gave a low chuckle as he always did. “Oh, I do love a glass of mead. Would it be rude of me to ask for seconds?”

Relishing in my reaction, Olford—or rather, the Spirit of Gales possessing his body—held the cup out for more.

“Right...sure. So, to confirm I’ve got this straight, Olford is your host?”

“Yes and no. It’s more of a landlord-tenant relationship.”

I was speechless for a while. Estia and the Spirit of Dusk had a contract together, a symbiotic relationship, and when the spirit took possession of her body, I could feel the difference in their presences. Olford and the Spirit of Gales, however, had flown completely under the radar. I had to focus extremely hard to notice a difference. So what did the spirit mean by implying they were just using the guildmaster’s body on loan?

“So, uh...” I poured the spirit a second cup as I got my jumbled thoughts together. “What brings you here?”

“Oh, what brings me here indeed!” the spirit snapped suddenly. “I very specifically had Olford slip in a hint as to how to become a sage, and yet wait as I might, no one comes to the fountain! You know where it is! I know you know! It would have been that easy to get my blessing!”

Huh. So spirits could write. But enough messing around. I had to be upfront.

“Thank you for that,” I said. “It was a great source of motivation for my training.”

“Okay?”

“But I felt that by accepting the sage class right then, I wouldn’t have learned anything. If I ever lost my holy magic again, or something similar happened, I felt that I would just give up.”

I was done relying on crutches. I needed to cultivate the strength to stand against despair on my own.

“And is that ongoing?”

“No, I was actually thinking about getting my magic back pretty soon. It’s nice here in Neldahl, but there are a lot of people waiting for my return.”

“Could you not have gone on this introspective journey *after* obtaining the means to become a sage?”

“I wasn’t sure if finally becoming a sage would really let me use holy magic again, so I had to study and prepare myself for the worst-case scenario.”

“I see. But you’ve still a long way to go on the path to sagehood. With my blessing, you now possess all six. Next, you will need to achieve level ten in every corresponding affinity.”

The spirit looked deep into my eyes. I started to sweat nervously.

“Um, what about the white fruit?” I asked.

“Ah, right, the fruit of the Tree of Fraternity. As I recall, it grew near the World Tree back when the tree still lived. Did you intend to seek it out? It would save you a good deal of time, true, but the Ancient Forest where it once was is teeming with dragons. I’m not confident you’ll live long enough to find any trace of it.”

I didn’t like the sound of a place like that. Even if that had been my plan, I would probably have given up on it right then, even with Brod and Lionel. But there was one thing confusing me: the white fruit in the forest tucked inside the pantry. Olford’s papers had told of a golden fruit that grew on the World Tree and a white one on the Tree of Fraternity. Did the spirit not know about that forest? Was my assumption about the white fruit I’d found being important just a misunderstanding on my part?

I couldn’t concentrate on the conversation anymore. Now I was too curious about how the last sage had found his fruit. All I knew about him was that he had been kind of eccentric and that he had invented God’s Lament-slash-Substance X. I hadn’t come across any records listing his other achievements, classes, or abilities. A sage should have been a legend on par with Lord Reinstar, and yet I’d heard next to nothing about him.

“Still ruminating?” The spirit controlling Olford’s body helped themselves to

more mead as they waited.

“I...want to know more about the one who became a sage before me,” I said finally. “How did he manage to get the white fruit?”

“Pope Fluna bestowed it on him,” the spirit answered, turning away and towards the moon. “She was in need of a sage at her side.”

How suggestive. Her Holiness represented the Church itself, so whoever she trusted enough to be her personal aide must have been exceptionally wise and strong. But the spirit didn’t seem willing to elaborate further.

“Will becoming a sage let me use holy magic like I used to?” I asked.

The spirit shook Olford’s head. “Frankly, I cannot say.”

“I read that they wield every element. Am I mistaken?”

“The sage is a class for those eccentric individuals who dedicate their lives to magical craft. As such, it requires a great deal of knowledge and will, with no small amount of luck and talent for every affinity. In that sense, I suppose one could say they wield all magic.”

“In other words, there’s a chance.”

“The texts tell us there have been fewer sages than even heroes, so little is known about them.” The spirit stroked Olford’s beard. “Needless to say, there’s no telling what would happen for one such as yourself who’s lost his touch with holy magic entirely.”

I knew it wouldn’t be easy to reclass as a sage, but this confirmed it. The only path available to me was simply believing in myself.

“Looks like I do have a long way to go. But if there’s never been any case of someone reviving a dead affinity, I’ll just have to be the first.”

“You’ve got the spirit. Doubtless you’ll not fail, though. You do have a god’s favor. However, so long as you hold the blessings of both the spirits and the dragons, you must be prepared to struggle.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Don’t tell me they come with a handicap.” I waited for the answer in anxious anticipation. I could practically hear the prelude to my doom.

“I’m almost positive the reason for your lack of success in casting elemental magic lies there,” the spirit said.

“You’re kidding.”

“The dragons’ blessings tend to compound one’s mana within the body in order to strengthen it, while the spirits’ blessings convert it to allow one to command spirit magic better. This is why casting standard magic may be difficult for certain affinities.”

I could’ve sworn I could almost see the spirit smirking, but that was probably just my persecution complex acting up again. Regardless, this was yet another massive barrier to overcome. Would I be able to *ever* cast holy magic again?

“Um, so how am I supposed to become a sage the way you say I’ll need to?” I asked.

“You could always change to arcanist and climb the ranks with spirit magic.”

And make all my dragon blessings worthless? Maybe in a fairy tale. “If I were Lord Reinstar...” I muttered.

“Oh? You knew Rein was a sage? Not even the records maintain that bit of information.”

I actually hadn’t known. But now I did. Honestly, it wasn’t even shocking at this point. Moving on.

“If I were Lord Reinstar, maybe I could do it. Do you really think I’d be able to master spirit magic?”

“It would normally be nearly impossible, but you’ve been blessed by the god of fate.”

Well, that meant me being from another world was out of the bag. Olford had appraised me pretty hard at our first meeting, and it probably made sense that the spirits knew of people like me.

“Sure, but that title only gives me a little extra SP every time I level up.”

The spirit laughed in Olford’s characteristic way. “Oh, that’s nothing but a side effect. That blessing is one of the most powerful of all and grants its bearer the power to defy misfortune with their very life.”

“Since when?!”

Then the fact that no one had died during our encounter with the Wicked One was all thanks to that title. The spirit seemed to get a lot more talkative after Lord Reinstar had been brought up. At least there was less of the ominous, high-register stuff.

“That’s why godly blessings are only bestowed on those who’ve undergone especially harrowing trials.”

I’d always thought that the god of fate’s blessing had come from me being reincarnated, and the Divine Healer’s from me clearing the Labyrinth of Trials alone. But that left me with a question.

“Did I get Monster Luck and Supreme Luck for literally no reason?” It couldn’t be. Were Monsieur Luck and Sir Preme Luck never even with me to begin with? I didn’t want to believe it. I waited for the spirit to tell me I was wrong.

They sighed. “As powerful as this particular blessing is in the face of adversity, trust me, you’d never have seen the light of day again if you’d met the Wicked One without skills such as those.”

The tension left my body. “That’s good. I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

“You prefer to cling to luck?”

“I mean, why not?”

They chuckled. “I suppose that’s a fair point. I can certainly see the day you reach sagehood.” They chuckled loudly again, and I felt a strong urge to eat that white fruit and become a sage then and there just to mess with them.

A moment later, a feeling in my gut told me that the moment I did, my meeting with the dragon(s?) within Neldahl wouldn’t be too far off. Come to think of it, back in Rockford, Lord Reinstar had given me some words to tell the Spirit of Gales in order to get their cooperation. Good thing I didn’t have to yell those out loud in front of Nadia and Lydia like a crazy person. But there wasn’t any harm in asking the spirit themselves now that they were right in front of me.

“Not to change the subject,” I said, “but would you have given me your

blessing if I'd stood in front of the fountain and yelled, 'I am Sir Wind, ruler of the world and fastest in the universe'?"

"Wh-Where did you hear that?!" The spirit's good mood immediately evaporated.

"Rockford."

"Oh, so you thought you could just leave a ticking time bomb down on the surface and I wouldn't find out, did you, Rein? Leave me up on an airship, will you..." Their body shook with anger. A while later, though, they looked back up at me. "Repeat that to anyone and I'm taking my blessing back. And I'll tell the entire world that you lost your magic. Understand? Good. Now forget that specific chain of words even exists."

I could only nod in fear for my life. If there was somehow any doubt that Olford was currently host to a spirit, there sure wasn't anymore.

"I'm glad we've come to an understanding," they said. "I'll introduce you to the Water Dragon and Wind Dragon tomorrow. Speak to them about how to wield the Eternal Dragons' power."

"Tomorrow? What's the rush? There's no labyrinth, so surely they haven't been taken by the Wicked One's curse."

"We have no reason to expect so, but I have little control over the flow of information in Neldahl. The only way to know for certain is to see for ourselves."

Based on previous encounters with the spirits and dragons, I got the impression that the two beings didn't get along very well. But it certainly wouldn't have been good for any dragons to be cursed, and giving me a blessing was a good enough excuse to make me go and check up on them. At the same time, the Eternal Dragons were part of what kept Neldahl afloat, and now I was worried about the whole city crashing down. I could only hope that Reinstar had a few backup systems in place.

"Sounds like tomorrow's the day we meet fate, huh?" I said, surrendering.

"And today is the day we drink mead."

The spirit threw back another glass. The next day, we would travel to the center of Neldahl to willingly meet a pair of Eternal Dragons.

11 — The Protectors

The next morning, after a night of drinking with Olford—I mean the Spirit of Gales—I told Nadia and Lydia the plan for the day over breakfast in Shurule’s dining hall.

“We’re visiting the fountain today,” I said. “We could be in for a tough fight, so I want you both to be ready.”

“So we’re meeting the Spirit of Gales,” Lydia murmured. “I wonder if they’ll lend me their power too.”

She looked worried, but the spirit had told me to keep quiet so that they could judge Lydia for themselves. On a related note, the reason they’d given me their blessing was apparently because I was “simple and unlikely to become blind with power.”

“Are we anticipating an encounter with an Eternal Dragon?” Nadia asked. “I’ve been blessed by the Draconis, but I was only given a message once. I’m looking forward to meeting one of them.”

I hadn’t ended up fighting the Holy Dragon or Flame Dragon, but the Earth and Thunder Dragons had nearly killed me. So personally, I wasn’t quite that excited. I smiled awkwardly in reply.

“Can you free a dragon without holy magic?” Lydia asked with concern in her voice. At least one of us was talking sense.

I couldn’t blame her. I’d have also been pretty nervous about rushing into a dragon’s lair without a strategy. The Earth and Thunder Dragons had each been an ordeal individually, and we’d be up against the Water and Wind Dragons at the same time. Even in top form, it wouldn’t have been easy. It would be one thing if they weren’t cursed, but I still couldn’t shake my bad feeling.

I had to be as ready as I possibly could. It wasn’t much in the way of insurance, but having Nadia around probably meant that the dragons wouldn’t kill their own mystic, right? Regardless, I intended to protect them both no matter what. And to that end, I had to get my holy magic back. That was beyond question.

Last night, I'd made a decision. I took out the white fruit and faced Lydia. "Honestly, I don't think it'll be possible as I am now. So I'm going to eat this, and then maybe we'll stand a chance."

Nadia eyed the fruit curiously. "You said that was most likely poisonous, didn't you? I thought you'd have gotten rid of it by now."

"I-I don't think this is a good idea," Lydia stammered, stepping away from the ominous apple.

"I've got nothing to lose," I said. "If I'm lucky, it'll make me a sage. And if I still can't use holy magic even then, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

The older sister continued to regard it with caution. "I find it strange that a mere fruit can appear so ominous."

Lydia maintained her distance. "I've never heard of obtaining a class from a food, sir. I *really* don't think this is a good idea."

To me, the thing was just an oddly colored apple, but I understood their concern. A single bite of it could have flatlined anyone without the proper resistances conferred by a continual consumption of Substance X.

I had asked the spirit last night about the dangers of possibly eating the white fruit if I ever found myself in possession of it, and according to them, the sage responsible for God's Lament had detected traces of poison, paralysis, confusion, petrification, enfeeblement, and silence-inducing effects. He had also conducted experiments with subjects consuming small amounts, but every single one had suffered intense trauma as a result, his study concluding that without high Spiritual Resist, the fruit could leave one in a vegetative state.

Hearing the horror stories had made me nervous, but a single look at my stat screen was proof of the many trials and tribulations I'd endured already. My skill levels had the final say, of course, though the confidence was a nice bonus. Needless to say, my path was clear.

"Only with the right resistance skills can someone eat this thing," I said. "The entire purpose of Substance X is, in fact, to cultivate those resistances and allow one to consume it, thereby becoming a sage."

The sisters stepped away even farther upon hearing the term “Substance X.” They’d been trained at Adventurer’s Guild HQ in Grandol by the Lineage of the White Wolf, so their history with the stuff was probably painful.

“I’m going to eat it now,” I told them. “If I lose consciousness, just wait for me to wake up and don’t panic.”

Apparently, it didn’t matter how one consumed it, so I started with a cup of Substance X for good luck, then took a bite. The horrible liquid overpowered any flavor or smell the fruit might have given off, and it went down easy. Soon enough, I’d finished the entire thing.

And then nothing happened. Nothing whatsoever. Had I been mistaken all along?

“Do you feel anything?” Nadia asked.

“He just...drank it. Like it was nothing,” her sister muttered vacantly. She stared at me in disbelief, still unable to get over my ability to drink Substance X so easily. Actually, I might not have drank any at all since meeting them. I’d been busy leveling up recently.

“Nothing,” I said. “I don’t feel a single thing.”

Opening my stat screen, I saw that Holy Magic was still grayed out, and nothing new had been added to my job section. My legs shook and I slumped down into a chair. Was it not the right fruit? Was it just some particularly tasty apple that I’d gone and wasted with Substance X?

All the strength left my body. That was it. My options had been reduced to two: train for decades or go searching through a forest of dragons.

Before I could wonder why the floor was suddenly so close to my face, everything went dark.

I couldn’t believe I’d passed out from shock. Pathetic.

I tried to pick myself up before I worried the sisters too much, but my body wouldn’t listen to me. Well, that was what happened when you didn’t have your crap together. I took a deep breath and tried to open my eyes next, and

then I finally realized. Everything was black, but not because my eyes were closed. I could tell they were wide open. Gradually, they adjusted to the darkness. The world became visible to me, except I didn't recognize it. I opened my mouth to wonder where I was, but no voice came out. The only control I had was over my mind, it seemed. I had no way of asking Nadia or Lydia to sit me up, or of knowing why they hadn't done so yet, come to think of it.

My heart started to race. I strained my senses to comprehend what was happening to me, though I could only assume it was a consequence of eating the white fruit.

Suddenly, a spiral of darkness began to swirl in front of me. Was I meant to enter it? No sooner than it had arrived did a blinding ray of light shine down, and when that was gone, so was the spiral. More than that, my surroundings were now dyed pure white.

What in the world was going on? And what was the deal with those four floating orbs? They were silver, scarlet, ocher, and yellow, in that order.

"The Holy Dragon, the Flame Dragon, the Earth Dragon, and the Thunder Dragon..." I muttered. My voice was working again.

One by one, the orbs glowed, morphing into each of the dragons themselves. But only their heads. I found this disconcerting.

"Long has it been, Luciel," said the Holy Dragon. "You've at last set upon the path to sagehood." His voice was much clearer than the first time we'd met. I was still in a bit of a state, though, and my blood suddenly boiled.

"I'm not here because I want to be!" I shouted. I immediately felt bad, though. "I'm sorry, I'm just a *little* stressed out. I told myself I'd thank you if we ever met again. It's thanks to your bones and scales that I'm not dead right now."

The dragon cackled. "Spare me the manners. I see you've changed. You are not the mistrustful one you were when you first freed me of my curse."

He had to forgive me for having been doubtful. It had kind of been a matter of life and death at the time. Now, of course, I knew how polite the Holy Dragon was when compared to his earth and thunder brothers.

“Call it inexperience, but I’d never met an Eternal Dragon before, so I was a little on guard at the time. I’m glad you were the first I freed, though.”

“We’ve little time for pleasantries, brother,” the Flame Dragon interjected, “though I do commend you for seeking out the Draconis’s mystic, I find it...loathsome that the Elemental’s was her sister.”

They knew of both Nadia and Lydia? Did blessings give them some sort of knowledge of the condition of their chosen or something?

“Indulge me,” the Holy Dragon replied. “You know, Luciel. Polygamy is accepted in this world. Should you have difficulty deciding, you could very well take both as your brides.”

“Forget the Spiritsworn. There can only be love enough for one,” the Earth Dragon chimed. “My brother in flame is right, however. Time is short. Heed me, Luciel, for when you awaken, you will do so as a sage. But you will have access to no magic except holy.”

I perked up upon hearing that I’d be a sage but slumped again at the part about having none of my other magic. “Because my dragon and spirit blessings contradict each other?”

“Unless a mystic were to perhaps settle things.”

Wait, then where did Lumina fit into all this? “Do you mean the woman originally meant to become the spirits’ and dragons’ mystic? How would she help?” I asked. My curiosity had gotten the better of me.

“The who now?”

“Well, so, there was a woman in Blanche who was originally intended to inherit the Draconis’ and Elemental’s blessings,” I explained, “but she became a paladin before truly coming of age, as nobles sometimes do, and she left her home young. And then at least five years later, Nadia and Lydia became mystics instead. They’re who I heard all this from.”

The standard age for coming-of-age ceremonies was fifteen, but Lumina had done it early, and I didn’t know if that might have had something to do with the conferring of blessings. The dragons were completely silent, however.

“Um, hello?”

“This is...a significant thing to hide from us. There will have to be punishment,” the Thunder Dragon rumbled. Punishment for who? Unfortunately, he didn’t linger on that. “Luciel, the Eternal Dragons have lived for as long as Galdardia itself, and in this time, only a scarce few have possessed our blessings in tandem with the spirits’.”

That was easy enough to guess. They wouldn’t have been very special if just anyone could have them.

“Yet, perhaps in a cruel twist of fate, this contradiction of powers has led to such individuals losing their abilities,” the Holy Dragon continued.

“Except for one, right?” I said.

“Correct. One exceptional man wielded both the powers of the dragons and spirits and made it his strength.”

“I can think of a few other things to call Lord Reinstar besides ‘exceptional.’”

“Your familiarity with Rein will make this simple. Have you the necklace embedded with our souls?”

“Got it locked up in my magic bag.”

“When you return, don it and never remove it. And when you cast your spells, do so in our name. Then will you obtain the supreme power you seek.”

“Excuse me, I didn’t ask for supreme power. I’ll get along just fine with my normal healing powers, thank you.” I hadn’t seen any fine print on Supreme Luck that implied it came with other supreme side effects.

“Oh,” the Holy Dragon said. “Well then.”

He winked at me, and a pale light flowed into my body. It felt warm. Comforting.

“It seems our time is up,” the Flame Dragon said. “Find us should you sire a child. We’ll be glad to offer them a blessing or two.”

“Shame that we could not speak longer,” the Earth Dragon added. “Remember this, Luciel. The dragons are the best.”

“When next we meet, it will be before our god, the Draconis. Bring the current Drakesworn as well as the original when the time comes,” the Thunder Dragon spoke calmly.

Lastly, the Holy Dragon concluded, “Free the last of our brethren and stop the encroaching demon invasion.”

“Okay, you can’t just end on a reveal like that,” I blurted, deadpan.

“Farewell.”

The four Eternal Dragons ignored me, returning to glowing orbs, and everything went white.

I groaned.

“I think he’s getting worse.”

“He drank Substance X *and* ate that random fruit, sister. I knew we should have stopped him!”

The light continued to blind me, but I seemed to be back in reality. I was sitting in a chair and not facedown on the floor, surprisingly enough, and only a few seconds appeared to have passed. From what I could gather, I had only just sat down, but I looked like death and wouldn’t speak. So the sisters were panicking.

I managed to tell them I was fine and opened my status screen, praying I hadn’t just dreamed everything. I scanned the hologram window and felt droplets of water hit the back of my hand. They were my tears.

I was no longer a healer.

I was a sage.

And on top of that...

“HELL YEAH!”



I couldn't contain myself. The sisters flinched at my outburst, so I told them the good news: that I had become a sage and that my Holy Magic skill was no longer grayed out. They celebrated with me as if it were their own achievement.

Just to make sure, I looked through my stat screen carefully one more time. Everything seemed to be in order. The grayed out "Healer X" text had become a shiny new "Sage I," and seeing my holy magic accessible again never got old no matter how many double takes I did. My spirit blessings had been consolidated, but unfortunately, I hadn't leveled up, and my attributes hadn't increased. On the bright side, my Swordsmanship skill had increased thanks to all the daily training.

Name: Luciel

Job: Sage I — Quad Dragoon IV

Age: 22

Level: 193

HP: 7310 — MP: 5300

STR: 852 — VIT: 932

DEX: 801 — AGI: 825

INT: 966 — MGI: 962

RMG: 960 — SP: 86

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Supreme Luck I Limit Break I — Martial Arts VI — Swordsmanship VI Spears IV — Shields IV — Archery I

Sword-and-Spear IV — Throwing VI — Ambulation VIII Magic Handling X — Magic Control X — Magic Amplification III Physical Enhancement VI — Short Cast IX — Null Cast VII Free Casting IV — Magic Circle Casting VI — Multicast III

Holy Magic X

Meditation IX — Focus IX — Leadership III

Detect Danger VIII — Detect Presence V — Detect Magic V

Scouting I — Butchery IV — Riding III

Life Recovery IX — Magic Recovery IX — Parallel Thinking VII Accelerated
Thought III — Spatial Cognition II — Trap Sensing IV

Trap Detection III — Disarming III — Cartography V

HP Growth Rate Up IX — MP Growth Rate Up IX

STR Growth Rate Up IX — VIT Growth Rate Up IX

DEX Growth Rate Up IX — AGI Growth Rate Up IX

INT Growth Rate Up IX — MGI Growth Rate Up IX

RMG Growth Rate Up IX — Physical Attribute Growth Rate Up IX

Poison Resist IX — Paralysis Resist IX — Petrify Resist IX

Sleep Resist IX — Charm Resist VII — Curse Resist IX

Enfeeble Resist IX — Silence Resist IX — Disease Resist IX

Shock Resist VII — Bewitchment Resist IX — Spiritual Resist X

Slash Resist IX — Stab Resist VII — Intimidation Resist V

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny — Protection of the God of Fate — Blessing of the Divine
Healer Blessings of the Dragons — Blessing of the Six Spirits — Dragonslayer
Slayer of Drakes — Giant Buster — Butcherer of Beasts Witness of the Wicked
One — He Who Released the Seal — Chosen of the Draconis

Looking over my stats, I recalled the gratitude I had felt all those years ago for having been reincarnated in a world where hard work was rewarded, and I cast the first spell I had ever learned.

“Oh Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!”

I envisioned my ailments dissipating, and that pale, white light radiated from my hands. But it wasn't a Heal like I remembered. The mana cost had hardly changed, yet the effect felt on par with a Middle Heal.

“Sages are no joke,” I murmured. “And I'm only level one.”

I was grinning so widely that I probably looked insane. Nadia and Lydia smiled with me.

“Congratulations, sir.”

“I'm so happy for you!”

They even started to cry for me, seeing for sure that I could use holy magic again. They'd stood by me all this time, caring for me, and I figured it was my turn to care for them from now on.

“No more exhausted walks back to the room after training, huh?” I said.

“I've been meaning to say this, but your training model could use some updating. It's awfully draconian of you to be going that hard late into the night,” Nadia said.

She was probably talking about how I would work out for hours on end to dispel those physiological urges I had reawoken to without my healer class keeping them in check. In times of duress, it was only biologically natural to feel stronger desires to...leave behind offspring, right? Well, about a week into the trip, it started to get torturous. There had even been times where I could have sworn the girls were doing it on purpose, and Elinesse often liked to barge into my personal space at the archive.

And yet, I couldn't lend myself to such urges. Even though it was difficult at times. Very difficult. My final line of defense had been the angel's pillow, with which I could reliably knock myself out, get a good rest, and wake up refreshed. It was only thanks to that that my willpower had hung on for so long.

At any rate, now that I was a sage (which still didn't seem real), I could already feel those emotions dwindling.

"I'm sorry for worrying you two," I said. "But I assure you it was all in the name of winning against worldly desires incited by your charm." They looked away, either embarrassed by the compliment or grossed out by the uncalled-for nature of it. I was only being honest, though. "I bet Master and Lionel were hurt even worse than me by the loss of my magic. They probably feel responsible, so I just wanted to get it back as soon as possible. For them."

They looked up and nodded.

"Oh. You were only thinking of them," Nadia said happily.

"That's so nice," her sister remarked.

They looked at me with admiration, but I wasn't entirely selfless. Regaining my holy magic was as much for me as it was for fixing things with Lionel and Brod, so it was easy to feel a little guilty about them thinking so highly of me. But it would have been weird to correct them too. As long as they were happy with it, I supposed there was no need to make things awkward.

I wanted to tell the pope by arclink crystal that I'd succeeded in my mission right that second, but that kind of communication wasn't totally secure. She'd told me so when I had contacted her a few days after arriving in Neldahl. One's mana was unique like a fingerprint, and others could use magic items to trace someone's magical signature and snoop on their conversations. Considering Neldahl was a center of research occupied by many countries, Her Holiness had warned me very strictly about keeping vital information out of arclink communications, so I was to only inform her once I'd returned.

Everyone else was aware of the danger as well, so I hadn't contacted Lionel or my master once. It was tempting to get in touch with them. Brod had told me he would go hunting to level up after clearing out his guildmaster duties, and Lionel was probably undergoing training in Yenice.

With one major worry off my shoulders, I wanted to check in on how things were going in the world below. I decided I'd ask the Spirit of Gales to do that for me later. Also, it sounded weird to call it "the world below," but I digress.

I'd nearly forgotten while lost in my thoughts that Nadia and Lydia were still standing right in front of me.

"Sir, are you listening?"

"Oh, sorry," I said. "What was that?"

"Will we be leaving after freeing the dragons?" Lydia asked.

If we were going back, that whole affair would definitely come first.

"It's hard to say until we see how things look, but that'll probably be the plan for now. Is there anything more you want to research while we're here?"

"Not necessarily," Lydia said shyly. "But we've never even left the guild. We've come all this way and haven't seen the town yet, so I was wondering..."

She had a point. We hadn't taken any time to stop and sniff the roses—literally. We'd ignored the garden and all the other amenities for the sake of studying and training. The sisters had permission to do whatever they wanted, but they had chosen to spend their time with me. With all that in mind, I couldn't exactly tell her no.

"You're right. I guess it's my fault for not making the time to let either of you ask sooner. Once the dragons are taken care of, I'll talk to Olford about taking a stroll around the city." He had offered to be our guide on the first day, though he'd probably forgotten by now.

The two put their hands together in excitement. They must have been waiting for this for a while, and I'd been too focused on myself to notice. That was my own fault, so I told myself I'd learn to be more considerate in the future.

We prepared for battle, and before meeting with the spirit at the fountain, we stopped by the training hall.

"Now that you're a sage, you're sure to be able to cast other magic," Nadia said.

"And the spirits will probably help you, since you have all their blessings!" her sister added.

Their optimism was inspiring, but the dragons had given it to me straight. I probably wouldn't be able to cast anything but holy magic. Still, I put on my

necklace, focused mana into the Illusion Staff, and pointed it at the wall to give it a try.

“Uh, Flame Dragon,” I chanted unsurely. “Fire? Activate?”

But I didn’t feel so much as a single drop of magic leave me. Deafening, awkward silence followed. The sisters gave me tepid looks. Maybe I should have tried a normal spell first. The problem was that I didn’t actually remember any of the chants for them.

Feigning confidence, I switched the staff to sword mode and took the stance I always did during my attempts to create slashes through the air. I focused my mana into the blade and, praying for something to actually happen this time, swung it.

“Flame Blade!” I shouted.

And then, all at once, enough mana to free cast a dozen Sanctuary Circles left my body. And there was more. The attack wasn’t edged. What came out of the Illusion Sword was, in fact, a scarlet snake, and when it reached the wall, it snapped its jaws onto it.



All of Neldahl itself seemed to shake with the violent impact. Yeah, so the Flame Blade was pretty strong. The proof was the thirty-centimeter-wide hole in the supposedly invincible wall. And the flames around it burned ceaselessly.

“So it’s less of a slash and more of a literal dragon... What do I even call that? ‘Flying Dragon Style’?”

I opened my stat screen to verify something, and indeed the attack had cost over a thousand MP...as I had already surmised from the sheer power of it. Five at once would be my limit, and reserved exclusively for emergencies. A single one would’ve been enough to destroy someone, though, so I definitely couldn’t use it during training.

Stunned by what I had done, I turned to see what the others thought. But the sisters were stupefied, staring at the burning hole in the wall.

“So, that thing uses a crap ton of magic, but, uh...what do you guys think?”

“Sir, what... What was that? Was that a spell? Was it even *magic*?” Nadia asked. “I swear I could sense draconic energy from it.”

“I’ve never seen a snake fly before, let alone while on fire! It looked so strong!” Lydia raved.

Nadia probably sympathized with my magic struggles, being not so good at it herself, so seeing me suddenly produce something so amazing had left her dumbstruck. Based on their reactions, the Flame Blade seemed like a hit.

“Do you think I could learn to do that?” Nadia asked.

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “This is probably a consequence of my dragon and spirit blessings conflicting. But I don’t think it’s something you need to really emulate anyway.”

“I see. Well, I think it’s an amazing attack.” She smiled, rather unconvincingly.

This seemed like as good an opportunity as any to fill her in on some of the things the Spirit of Gales had taught me.

“The dragons’ blessings improve the wielder’s physical abilities, right?” I told her.

“That much I understand.”

“And that’s why you’ll learn to project normal slashes a lot easier than me. Control is what’s most important to magical power, and mana can be used to enhance your body, so without control, your strength suffers.”

“So how might I improve on that?”

“I think you’d benefit from focusing on a single element and getting a feel for mana that way.”

“In that case, I suppose I’ll center my efforts around thunder magic.” Nadia smiled, but more to hide her uncertainty, and it made my chest tight.

She’d learned to cast spells decently enough over the past three months, but they were rather weak. Perhaps it was her job as a swordswoman and title as the Drakesworn that limited her inherent talent. Personally, I thought she had a lot of potential with Physical Enhancement, though.

“Have you gotten the Magic Handling and Magic Control skills yet?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “A book I read said that anyone could do it, but I’m having some...trouble.”

The book I had read hadn’t been so nice about it, but that aside... We talked a little more, and I discovered something surprising. Apparently, the sisters could hardly even sense their own mana, much less manipulate it. Lydia could use spirit magic just fine, but that meant most of the fine-tuning came from the spirits themselves, and ever since coming to Neldahl, she’d been on about the same skill level as her sister.

“Nadia, I think you should probably just use SP to take the Magic Control skill,” I said.

“Understood.”

And so she did. After telling her how I always trained with it, we at last left the hall and headed for the fountain.

On an unrelated note, although the flames had died down, the hole remained and showed no signs of sealing up. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be charged to our room at check-out.

12 — A Glimpse

After testing my new power at the training hall, we came to the fountain in the center of the city. Olford was reading a book on a nearby bench.

“Apologies for the wait,” I said to him.

The old man looked up from his book and immediately cast a spell. I flinched, but all the spell did was raise a green barrier around the fountain.

“There. We’ll be free from nosy eyes and ears here,” he said. “Now, you wouldn’t have anything to do with the enormous explosion I heard from the training hall, would you?” After appraising me with a quick glance, he froze up. “You became a sage?”

The pope’s warning to be careful about spies had probably been meant for other foreign dignitaries, not Olford. Speaking of which, was this actually Olford? Or the spirit?

“Hey, what would you do if I shouted you-know-what right now?” I asked.

“You know damn well what I’d do! Keep that mouth shut!” he snapped back.

Yup. It was the spirit. It was a lot harder to tell with that one than the Spirit of Dusk. Anyway, why were they being so cautious right now? The Spirit of Gales commanded a pretty wide range of territory, as one would expect from the title, so surely they’d have noticed if anything was out of the ordinary.

“Why all the precautions?” I asked. “Olford knows how to handle a little snooping, I would think.”

“The barrier is an added layer of security. What’s about to happen could potentially put the very existence of Neldahl at risk were it to get out. Meanwhile, Olford is still waffling over who to choose as his successor.”

This sounded more important than expected. We were probably about to go to the core of the city. I couldn’t think of any place more fitting for dragons than that. Also, if Olford couldn’t choose a successor, what would happen to this place? Would the spirit latch onto someone else? Surely Neldahl wouldn’t just fall out of the sky...right?

“How long has he been looking?”

“Several years and still nothing. Honestly, the man I’m stuck to is utterly helpless when left to his own devices.” The spirit pinched Olford’s forehead in exasperation. “What do you think? Want to end this torment for me?”

It was probably a joke more than anything, but it sounded pretty appealing.

“Have you been pretending to be him this entire time?”

The spirit smiled. “Oh no. When you first came, when you spoke in his office, and when you began training in magic—all of that was with Olford’s mind. The old man loves to watch young ones make something of themselves, and you three were no exception.”

Then Olford himself had been the one who’d written all those papers for me. I hadn’t been sure what to make of him at first—he’d seemed more interested in goofing around than actually helping—but he always came through as long as we put in the effort. I didn’t regret erring on the side of caution at first, but I hoped we could work to be on better terms moving forward. The one thing still in the back of my mind, though, was whether he knew the true reason behind Nadia’s trouble with magic.

“He says watching others strive for something, particularly magic, reminds him of his younger days,” the spirit explained.

I recalled the guildmaster once lamenting in passing that many came to Neldahl seeking knowledge, but few came in pursuit of magic for magic’s sake. Finally, I felt like I understood why he had told me to never forget the passion that drove me to do just that. That was why he’d seemed to have a bit of a soft spot for us.

“Anyhoo, that’s enough chattering. Let’s head down. Through the fountain!” the spirit exclaimed.

“Never expected to find the same techniques at Rockford used for a fountain,” I said.

“But unlike those, the magic item here only makes it *look* like a fountain. It’s not actually there. Don’t worry; you’ll not come out drenched on the other end.”

I believed that to a certain extent but still hesitated on that first step. True to the spirit's word, however, I remained completely dry. They cast a spell and the fountain sank into the ground, walls rising around us.

"Is this a magic elevator?"

"Precisely. A special one, at that. Only Olford and I can control it. Want to know how it works?"

Goosebumps suddenly rippled across my skin for some reason. "I'll pass. We're only here for a few more days anyway."

"Shame."

I got distinct Olford vibes from that rather than the spirit's. A while later, the elevator stopped. Before us stretched a wide-open space, conspicuously resembling the boss room of a labyrinth. And adding to my suspicion was one of those big dragon doorways I always found inside them.

"Is there a reason we weren't shown this the day we got here?" I asked.

"Who knows? Certainly couldn't be out of jealousy because Fluna rejected him in the past and he was envious that you've become her new favorite." The spirit chuckled. "Or maybe the geezer thought that by keeping you here, his old unrequited love would give him a call."

True, Her Holiness did look exceptionally young, but her race could live for hundreds of years. And, I mean, she was Lord Reinstar's daughter. It wouldn't have surprised me if she had some extra mysticalness going on.

Human emotion was a tricky business. But maybe the fact that we were here now meant that he'd found some semblance of closure.

"Fair enough, I guess." I smiled awkwardly and paced towards the door. I was shocked by what I found, though. "Uh, it's unlocked?"

"It has been since Neldahl's founding," the spirit said. "Were you to somehow find yourself here, very few would have the blessing required to even perceive it. I'd call that a fair amount of security."

I felt fine standing here, but I couldn't say the same for the sisters. I looked at them, and while Nadia seemed well, Lydia looked somewhat pale.

“Will Olford’s body hold up?” I asked.

“I will prevent him from coming to harm, though it is already under significant duress. He is only human.”

Were they implying I wasn’t?

“Then how about I leave Lydia with you? Nadia and I will push ahead.”

“I can go, sir,” Lydia insisted.

“You ought to listen,” the spirit interjected. “Stay here and study up on the wonders of wind-based spirit magic with me, won’t you?”

“But I...”

It seemed the Spirit of Gales really intended to form a contract with Lydia and teach her. The spirit smiled, but Lydia gave us one more pleading look.

“Leave Mister Luciel to me,” Nadia said placatingly. “I have my duty as the Drakesworn, and you have yours as the Spiritsworn.”

Lydia exhaled heavily, reluctantly ceding that there was no shame in seeing to her own responsibilities. “Fine. But be careful.”

“We will. Look after her,” I told the spirit. “We’re off to meet some Eternal Dragons.”

“We await your return,” the spirit replied.

And so, Nadia and I walked through the door.

“It’s unsettling how I sense nothing but it still feels like we’re being watched.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll run into those dragons before long.”

The door was connected straight to a flight of stairs, and we descended. When we reached the bottom, I tried to cast Sanctuary Circle on the two dragons, but I never had the chance.

“Reveal yourself, sage,” one said inside my head.

“And make known to us your potential,” said the other.

“No blessings for cowards,” they echoed together.

I wasn't very interested in the blessing, but I had a feeling I didn't have a choice.

"The dragons just spoke to me. Did you hear it?" I asked Nadia.

"Hear what?" she replied, tilting her head. Apparently, being the Drakesworn didn't make you privy to every conversation. Or maybe it was like spirits and you needed specific bonds to converse with them. Who knew? I sure didn't.

"The Eternal Dragons seem to want to test me. Get ready for combat."

"Yes, sir."

We stepped off the stairs. Waiting for us were the Water Dragon and the Wind Dragon, the twin dragons that the book had told of. Unlike the others, they seemed completely lucid and their scales looked normal, uncorrupted by the Wicked One's curse. In fact, they seemed to have energy to spare as they gazed down at us while floating in the air. But wait, if they didn't need to be freed, then what were we doing here?

"Welcome, sage. Welcome, Drakesworn."

"You have our thanks for rescuing our brethren from the Wicked One's clutches."

The dragons spoke calmly. It didn't even feel like I was being crushed under the weight of their presence, which was a nice change.

"None of it was really on purpose, but yeah, glad things worked out."

"We, the dragons, are eternal and ultimate."

"And so it shall be proven in combat."

This was new. Sir Preme Luck seemed to be a crueller master than Monsieur Luck.

"You mean against each other?"

The dragons cackled. *"The sage of this era is a unique one."*

"Such humor, even in our presence. We fight not each other, but you."

"Be at ease knowing that you will not be subject to the full extent of our might."

“At ease” was probably the least accurate way of describing my current state of being.

“We share our brothers’ power, but we shan’t assail you with any attack that might kill you where you stand,” one dragon said.

“Fight well and you will have our blessing,” the other added.

“Regale us with your prowess,” they boomed together.

Their eyes lit up with delight. Meanwhile, I was screaming on the inside about how the only two gods that ever seemed to exist at any given moment were the Wicked One and his pal, the Grim Reaper. The dragons’ excitement reminded me of the look Brod and Lionel would give me, and that alone made it clear to me that the twin drakes reveled in combat. They probably would have gotten along well with those battle-crazed lunatics, who would have undoubtedly been all over this scenario. Granted, I already knew that pretty much all dragons loved fighting. All the ones I’d fought under the Wicked One’s curse had likely been holding back.

Monsieur Luck had done a great job of keeping me safe, but Sir Preme Luck, whose track record solely consisted of giving me powers meant for fighting, was already on thin ice. The reason I’d been led here was probably because I would grow from this battle, and yet my mind continued to race in search of a way out. The twin dragons were valid in their own right, but I really wasn’t feeling like an all-out brawl. Still, my options were looking pretty slim.

And then I noticed that something was wrong with Nadia. Sweat was beading on her forehead, and her eyes looked dead and distant.

“Time out, something’s not right,” I said.

The dragons looked unfazed, however.

“Be calm. No harm will come to the mystic.”

“She is speaking with the Draconis through us.”

“Take her to the stairs. I shall be your first opponent,” said the Water Dragon.

“I will watch the girl so that you may fight with all you have,” the Wind Dragon said, carrying Nadia away on a magical breeze. A dark green membrane

covered her body.

“Challenge me as many times as you like,” the Water Dragon’s voice reverberated in my head.

“But the moment you surrender, you forfeit our powers,” the Wind Dragon added.

“If peace be your wish, then power you will need, along with wisdom in harmony.”

“Only then will your dream come true.”

“Death by naught but old age,” they echoed. Deep laughter followed.

Ignoring how they knew what my greatest desire was, I cursed them silently. Forget the blessings, the sooner these jerks got with the reincarnating, the better.

13 — Thinking Outside the Box

The room was twice as big as the other chambers with dragons I'd been to, yet it somehow still felt cramped. The Water Dragon in front of me and the Wind Dragon behind me probably had something to do with that. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place.

I had the privilege of making the first move, but it was hardly an advantage in this situation. I couldn't pull any punches. At the same time, something too flashy would be easy to read. I'd have to be tricky. And I couldn't let myself get pessimistic either. The smartest thing to do was negotiate and give myself as much of an edge as possible.

"After I became a sage, I learned how to use the dragons' powers, but it takes a lot of magic. I can only use it five times. So could you wait until my mana's recovered?" I asked the Water Dragon.

"But of course. Battle is not only the trading of blows. Utilize your wit to its fullest extent."

It was probably obvious what I was trying to do, but I appreciated the consideration. Although I could have offered more conditions and such to my advantage, we hadn't even started fighting yet, so I put that idea to rest lest I incur the dragon's anger.

"My 'fullest extent' probably won't be very much, so do me a favor and go easy on me."

The dragon growled in reluctance. Circulating mana throughout my body, I activated Physical Enhancement, cast Area Barrier for defense, and prepared for combat.

"Quad dragoon Luciel, ready for battle!"

I kicked off the ground. My target was large, so I anticipated speed not being a threat. The one attack I had to look out for was their breath—I couldn't dodge that or tough it out like normal physical attacks—so I charged in close enough that the dragon couldn't use it. When there were only about a dozen meters between us, I imbued the Illusion Sword with mana.

“Flame Blade! Thunder Blade! Earth Blade!”

If none of my usual methods of approach would work, three of my strongest techniques in a row seemed about right for an opponent of this magnitude. But I should have known better than to attempt new moves in the middle of a fight. The Flame and Thunder Dragons manifested and flew forth, but the Earth Dragon was missing.

The two snakes bit down on the Water Dragon, and a thick cloud of steam obscured the battlefield. I stumbled dizzily after having over half my mana sapped all at once but stayed on my feet and prepared for a follow-up attack. My feet, however, wouldn't move.

“What? Ice?”

I was frozen to the floor. We must have traded blows at the same time. The steam given off by the Flame Blade's collision with the Water Dragon finally dissipated, revealing the drake deity surrounded in ice, unharmed.

“Not even a scratch?” I murmured.

“A valiant attempt, but you ought to consider your opponent's elementality more.”

“Listen, how was I supposed to know you can control ice? Your name's not Ice Dragon.”

“What do you think ice is made of, fool? Ready yourself and try ag—”

Just as the dragon was taking a stance, an ambush came from the rear—from the dragon of earth behind him. On second thought, it didn't quite have the same presence as a dragon, so let's go with “earth snake” for convenience's sake. The earth snake born from the Earth Blade latched onto the Water Dragon's back, taking him (and me) by surprise. A clean hit.

I tried to use the chance to free myself from the ice, but it wouldn't break, and the longer my legs stayed stuck in it, the more I started to lose feeling in them. It was getting pretty tempting to just heal them with holy magic.

“To think that you would stagger your attacks and lower my guard with conversation. Clever. This should be interesting.” Water suddenly manifested

out of nowhere, swelling until the mass was as big as the dragon himself.

“Though invisible, moisture exists in the air itself. With which I can attack or defend at will!”

From the massive bubble of water came baseball-sized chunks, hailing down in numbers too great to dodge.

“No choice.” The ice still anchoring my feet was a nuisance, but all I could do against the attack was defend myself with a shield.

“Predictable,” the dragon growled.

A few grueling moments later, the ice at my feet was gone. So, he could unfreeze too. That just wasn’t fair.

A barrier of water appeared around the dragon. *“Sage, have you no elemental magic?”*

“No,” I replied. “Only holy magic. Also, I literally only just became a sage, so this is all kind of new to me.”

“Focus your fire mana and concentrate it at your feet.”

I did so, and the feeling began to return to them.

“Ow, okay, that’s cold!”

A moment later, ice had frozen around them all over again.

“If you truly can command fire, then prove it to me by melting that ice. Until then, shiver.”

“Roger that,” I groaned. I wasn’t exactly in a position to argue. Literally.

I closed my eyes and envisioned my inner mana, specifically that of fire, and coalesced it inside me. I could feel the gazes of the two dragons on me, though any words they might have been saying were likely only being shared with each other. They and their expectations were not even remotely of interest to me, but I had the feeling that I’d be stuck here forever until I met them. So I just had to take this in stride like all my training.

Time quickly passed, and the coldness in my feet gradually turned to pain, then to nothing at all. At some point, I realized that I could have freed myself at

any time with Dispel, but that felt like cheating. As did Extra Heal, so I restrained myself. Yet, no matter how much mana I concentrated, the ice remained.

As I racked my brain for the solution, a voice echoed in my head. *“Sage, your blessings do bind you, but not as much as your clinging to rationality. Unless you learn to allow for creativity, that ice will forever be your prison.”*

I really had to sit Sir Preme Luck and Monsieur Luck down one of these days and figure out why they only bothered to help at the eleventh hour.

“Please do not make me stuck here for eternity,” I moaned. “What do you mean ‘creativity’?”

“I offer you one hint. You witnessed me utilize water as both offense and defense. It has the potential for both.”

“But I can’t...”

“Can or cannot, neither is knowable until one tries. To presume otherwise without seeing one’s potential for oneself is utter foolishness. If you would rather squirm than act, you will do neither in this icy tomb.”

“What? Hey, let’s pause for a bit here!”

The ice surged upward, encasing my entire body and leaving only my face free.

“Humans are creatures of indecision unless forced. This is your ultimatum.”

The Water Dragon descended to the ground, paced to the back, and coiled up to take a nap, just like his brother had done not long ago. Evidently, I had failed to meet their expectations and was no longer worth the trouble. I wouldn’t lose any sleep over that, but being a popsicle would probably cut into my restfulness before long.

I couldn’t run. I couldn’t *move*. I hadn’t asked for any of this, but here I was. Before I inevitably ended up passing out, I had to use the dragon’s hint and find a way out of this. Based on what he had said, I could surmise that my preconceived notions were holding me back, but what was it I lacked? “Creativity”?

I still held the Illusion Sword in my hand, though said hand was currently

frozen, so it didn't do me much good. My body temperature was dropping fast, my consciousness fading with it. I considered blanketing myself in the Flame Dragon's power, and although I imagined it would have melted the ice, it probably would have melted my skin too.

What do I do?

Those words repeated ad infinitum inside my mind. Was using the Flame Dragon my only option? Would I even be able to? Would I even *survive* it? But if I couldn't manage something like that, even with my abilities back, would I live through a possible second encounter with the Wicked One? No. I wasn't so confident that I would. In that case, there was only one thing left to do: take the Water Dragon's advice and get a little crazy. If worst came to worst, I had Extra Heal.

Clinging to my fading awareness, I flooded my magic through the Illusion Sword. "Protect me, Holy Dragon! Burn, Flame Dragon! Free me from this damned ice!"

A pale white dragon enveloped my armor, followed by a scarlet one, overlapping the light. The ice melted at once, and the dragons disappeared, their roles complete.

"How's that?!" I shouted.

An instant later, I nearly fell over from magical exhaustion and had to down a potion before I made a fool of myself. The nausea did not abate so easily, however.

"A fine display, if lacking in grace. You'll find little use for such a technique in the midst of battle. Allow me to enlighten you on the proclivities of magic while your mana recovers."

"I will join, brother. I've grown weary of spectating."

Perhaps the Water Dragon and Wind Dragon choosing the center of magical research as their home wasn't much of a coincidence.

14 — The Awe-Inspiring

I'd become exhausted from over-spending my magic, and now I was being subjected to a lecture about the makeup of mana by the Water and Wind Dragons.

"Your mind is narrow. Until you widen your perspective, you will never make the most of your newly acquired abilities."

"You enervate yourself because you call upon our powers with your mana alone. Why do you think you possess the blessings of the spirits as well?"

"Believe me, I wish I knew, but it hasn't even been a day. I need more time to really understand what I can do."

"Tell us, sage, what are the blessings to you?"

That was an easy one. "The dragon blessings improve my physical abilities, enhance my resistance to your attacks, and boost my strength and defense against lesser dragons and such. The blessings of the spirits improve elemental resistance, right?"

"That is not...incorrect, though you lack understanding. Of our kind and yourself."

"That which we perceive is only a fraction of what we can understand. Knowledge is your ally."

For some reason, their lessons reminded me of something you'd find in a business magazine. I nodded in reply.

"Our power is greater than you know. No mortal could ever hope to replicate it, no matter the number of blessings."

"What you wield is nothing more than a manifestation of our might, given form by the blessings of the spirits."

The spirits' powers, despite being in dissonance with the dragons', were giving it form? Then was the reverse possible?

"I thought the two conflicted with each other," I said.

“You seem to not yet understand. True, your difficulty with spellcasting is indeed the fault of your possession of both dragon and spirit blessings.”

“Indeed. No matter how you try, you will struggle to produce magic that normal individuals can easily create. And as you were not born with the spirits’ favor, spirit magic will be largely lost on you.”

So it was true that the two powers were essentially opposites. Then what was I missing?

“Dumb it down for me, please. It’s mostly vacant space in my head, so I’m already kind of confused.”

“Normal humans can not hear or see the spirits; thus, wielding their power is equally beyond them.”

“That seems like kind of important information that no one ever told me.”

The twin dragons continued, heedless of my moaning.

“Be that as it may, you have learned to manifest the might of the dragons.”

“Though it still is not enough to be your sword against strife.”

Okay, so they were basically telling me to shut up until they were done.

“Should you wish to don our brethren’s strength as you did before, you must envision the miracle you seek to make true and offer your mana to the spirits. In this way will you expend less of your own magic.”

“Invoking it through your blade as you’ve done, however, will continue to deplete you greatly.”

Putting that into Luciel terms, that meant concentrating the dragons’ magic through my sword and casting it as if producing an energy slash would use an enormous amount of MP, but by instead treating it as spirit magic and enveloping my body in it, I could use it at less of a cost. I think? Basically, I didn’t have to go shooting out pure, unbridled dragon energy.

“You appear confused, but let us first explain the blessings in detail. The spirits’ blessings allow the mana of the corresponding element to be manipulated more freely and the conversion of mana to a variety better suited to them.”

“Innumerable spirits exist in nature, but even in the presence of mana, they are typically dormant. However, there is, in fact, a hierarchy and order to their function. Those spirits of such power as to proffer their blessing to others can act in command of lesser spirits.”

“As a sage, even should your link be weak, you ought to be able to harness the ambient mana present within nature.”

Did that mean I could channel that to potentially use the dragons’ power at a fraction of the MP cost? But then why couldn’t I do the same with the blade versions?

“At the moment of casting, our power that you wield becomes distinct from nature. Thus, so long as it remains adjoined to you, the spirits may supplement what you lack.”

“However, mana cast from your own body cannot be joined with mana from nature.”

“I believe you know what it is you must do now, sage.”

“I need to circulate the mana around me like I do with the mana inside me, control it, and reinforce it with the magic I already have.”

“Indeed. I would have simply felt cruel toying with you in your earlier state.”

“Shall I be your next opponent?”

“That sounds fantastic, but I haven’t heard the explanation about the dragon blessings,” I interjected. The Wind Dragon was anxious to get started, but a bit of advice didn’t mean I had the whole thing figured out. I needed to drag this out long enough for my MP to regenerate.

“Ah, right. Our blessings strengthen the body and the elements.”

Yeah, it sounded like the spirits were the more useful of the two. “Okay?”

“Do you now understand the blessings and powers that dwell within you?”

“Kind of. I think I’ve got the gist.”

“Then let us fight. Or perhaps you should recover first. I find no sport in tormenting the weakened.”

Hey, now they were talking some sense. “So, what now?” I asked.

“I’m going to fling you into the air. Envision yourself flying and control your movements.”

“Wait, whoaOOOH! Okay, I’m in the air now!”

My feet suddenly left the ground. The floor grew farther and farther away until I was eye to eye with the twin dragons. The odd feeling of instability gave me that indescribable rising sensation in a certain place between the legs.

“Those with wind magic possess the ability to move through the sky at will. Now, fly and feel what it is to soar.”

How had I even gotten into this situation? What was I, some kind of toy? Somehow, I managed to keep from flailing around like a rag doll, but for whatever reason, the Wind Dragon didn’t like this, and he upped the difficulty.

“You balance well, sage. I’m going to create a burst of headwind now. Endure the impact.”

I cast Area Barrier without a second thought. The instant I did, an invisible wall of some kind slammed into my left side, sending me careening. My body rolled uncontrollably, and I lost all sense of where my center of gravity was. Soon enough, all the spinning sent the fluid in my ears out of whack, and my eyes started to spin.

“Be one with the mana, and call to the spirits. These gales should be nothing to one of your talents.”

I would have appreciated turning *down* the gales, but that was wishful thinking. Instead, I changed my perspective and hatched a plan.

“Earth Dragon, spirits: give me a way to ride these waves!” I shouted. The dragon grunted in interest as light shone at my feet, giving form to a small tablet of gypsum in the shape of a wakeboard. “As long as I’ve got something beneath my feet, I can manaaaAAAH!”

The wind caught against the increased surface area, and I went falling headfirst towards the ground. Mere centimeters from my fate, something stopped me.

“Uh, thanks.”

My magic board was in pieces just a short distance away. It could have been my head too, but thankfully, it wasn't, so I was somewhat calm enough to note that I had managed to create material out of nothing in midair. Not everyone was so lackadaisical, though.

“You buffoon! Why would you attempt to fight the wind?!”

The Wind Dragon carried me up to his face, where he could lecture me thoroughly. My little stunt had angered him quite a bit, and I had no real excuse to offer. I couldn't exactly have told him I'd gotten the idea from an anime.

“I wasn't trying to. I wanted to ride the waves, and I thought having something to stand on would help me keep my balance.”

“I anticipated that you would attack me, or carve through the winds with the Thunder Dragon's power. Anything but *that*,” the Wind Dragon said out loud. “I wouldn't want to be the one to poison flight for you with unfortunate trauma.”

“Wait, what was the point of this again?”

“To train you to fly, of course. Do all men not dream of soaring through the heavens?”

Screw you, Lord Reinstar. “Right, then what was the deal with the air wall you smacked me with?”

“Even the smallest-minded wyvern can bid the winds to create such obstacles. You were to learn how to overcome it.”

Something about this guy was just exhausting. Like a dad trying way too hard to relate to a son who's growing up too fast. The point of this had probably been to elicit a love of flying in me, but it had been the equivalent of tossing your kid into the deep end of the pool and telling them to swim. Of course, part of it was my fault for forgetting that the dragons and spirits operated on entirely different wavelengths from humans. At least I hadn't died. It didn't even seem so bad if I thought of it like a theme park ride.

“By the way, when is Nadia supposed to wake up?” I asked.

“That depends on the Draconis. She will awaken in the coming days.”

“Wait, days, plural? She could be like that for *days*?”

“It is up to the Draconis.”

A day to us was probably just a short hour to beings like these.

“I can’t leave her like that for so long. I have to take her somewhere safe.”

“You cannot leave this room, but by all means.”

“If anything needs doing, we can assist.”

I took out one of the hermit keys and sent Nadia to rest in one of the hermit coffins. Now that I thought about it, if the dragons didn’t have the same way of thinking as mortals, maybe I didn’t need to be as painfully respectful as I thought.

“Okay, now that that’s taken care of...” I said. “You two, what exactly do I need to do in order for you to be satisfied? What sort of goal am I supposed to be striving towards?”

“The task before you is not a long one, though exactly how long it will take will depend on you.”

“First, you must learn to use the power of our brethren appropriately.”

“And then you will show us how you wield it.”

“What we seek is naught but resolve.”

Now this was nostalgic. Just me and my back to the wall, like old times. I pumped myself up, and already repeating to myself that I would not die here like a time-tested mantra, I prepared to take on the Eternal Dragons’ trial.

15 — The Twin Dragons' Legacy

Sleep and meals were my only respite from one of two things: being frozen or suddenly being launched into the air. The torment was so intense that before I knew it, a week had gone by. And yet, in all that time, it didn't even feel like I was improving. I felt more like entertainment for the twin dragons than anything else. My only solace came from thinking it just seemed that way because of the ridiculous difficulty of the training, and when I thought back to my encounter with the Wicked One and all the things I'd done on the way to becoming a sage, it made the whole ordeal easier to endure.

Over time, I stopped getting encased in ice and taking hits while in the air so much. The only thing that changed about my method was that I started using Area Barrier less and High Heal or Extra Heal more, soothing my wounds and even restoring entirely lost cells. I'd never been happier to have my holy magic back.

"Sage, you have truly come to understand your blessings as a true bearer should."

"Indeed, you are not the man who first entered this chamber."

"It sure doesn't feel like it." I gave the dragons a pointed look, but they hadn't complimented me at all until now, so I was happy to hear it. Granted, it only made sense that I'd improve at least somewhat, considering I had come to Neldahl without any magic whatsoever and then waltzed over to a pair of dragons moments after becoming a sage.

"Luciel, water can flow, solidify, or rise as steam. Its potential is limitless."

"Wind is formless, but not immaterial. As it becomes the current beneath one's wings, so too can it be the headwind in one's path."

"What's with the sudden philosophy?"

I wasn't used to them using my real name, so I tensed up. But then I heard a *ping* in my head.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Water Dragon Title Obtained: Protection of the Wind Dragon “Wait, what?”

I hadn't really done anything to prove myself yet. But they'd just given me their blessings. I would have expected them a little later—say, after I managed to actually land a hit against them.

“We have borne witness to your indomitable will and unwavering courage.”

“Full confidence have we that one day, you will wield our powers with complete mastery.”

The twin dragons descended from the air and landed in front of me. Piercing me with their gazes, they continued.

“Little time remains for us.”

“And so it is too soon to unleash our full might.”

“I'm really not following.”

They were talking like they would perish at any moment now. The twin dragons exchanged glances.

“We are beset by the Wicked One's curse.”

“It is unclear how he penetrated a barrier as strong as the one which shields all of Neldahl.”

“Luckily, however, we were there to strike back when he appeared. But the magical mechanisms which keep the city afloat were destroyed in the battle.”

“We labored long to repair them.”

Uh, wind spirit? What the heck were you doing? How did you let a god sneak into your city?

“Could they be replaced with something non-magical?”

“Magic or not, when the enemy is a god, wicked though he may be, there is little that can be done to hinder his will.”

“The sigils have been restored, so Neldahl will not fall prey to him yet.”

“So, when exactly were you cursed?” I asked.

“The hex was set to be cast upon us at the moment of the magic sigils’ repair.”

“It was a clever trick that deceived even us.”

The dragons’ voices took on more somber tones. It was starting to get on my nerves how the Wicked One seemed to be the only god with an interest in this world. Really, I wanted to march on up to Crya’s office and give her a piece of my mind for somehow letting this jerk go around and seal half a dozen dragon deities away from the world that *she* was supposed to be protecting.

Focusing on the present, though, the dragons didn’t look cursed at a glance. They were lucid, moving freely—their inability to hold a proper conversation was a consequence of their nature, so that wasn’t out of the ordinary. And above all, they didn’t seem to be in any kind of pain. Were they still in the early stages of the curse? In which case, could it be cured?

“Hey,” I said, “I think I should be able to undo the curse without killing either of you. Can I give it a try?”

“The curse is part of our being now. To undo it would be to liberate our very souls.”

“We only keep our minds sane by actively suppressing the pain. In truth, we can scarcely move our bodies.”

“That’s why you used all this time to teach me instead of fighting,” I remarked. But the dragons simply floated back up without acknowledging it.

“The mystic will return to us shortly,” one of their voices echoed.

“So we entrust you with one final trial,” said the other.

“Purify our forms,” they boomed together.

“Utilize all you have learned and lay us to rest.”

“Free us from the Wicked One’s curse, and make our power yours.”

Seemed they were keen on the tests right up to the end. I would have been moved by their zeal if it hadn’t meant I’d have to fight. But like Lord Reinstar said, by freeing the dragons of the primary four elements, I would secure the hero’s victory against the Demon Lord and protect the future. This was the first step on my path to retirement, a life without demons or lords or wicked ones.

After some internal debate, I finally answered, “All right. But just so you know, my magic’s gotten a big boost since I became a sage, so there might not even be a single bone left of you when I’m done.”

The dragons cackled in my head.

“You’ve spirit enough to slay a dragon!”

“If it’s a prize you seek, it has already been given.”

“Dissatisfied? Then make our might yours.”

“And use it to overcome this final trial.”

“Stand ready!” they exclaimed.

If only the trial had been to free them and be on my way. But the time to lament was over. I felt vibrations in the mana behind and above me. Breath attacks.

“Protect me, Holy Dragon. Carry me, Thunder Dragon. Spirits, make this power manifest,” I chanted. It came out reflexively, before I could even think.

My body was promptly imbued with the essence of the Holy Dragon as the Thunder Dragon wrapped around my legs. In the next instant, everything around me was flitting past my eyes at high speed. I’d dodged the attack. Ascertaining I was safe, I free cast Sanctuary Circle, knowing that the twin dragons wouldn’t sit around and wait for me to chant. The spell was cast, and the twin dragons were engulfed in a spinning Sanctuary Circle, where I thought I saw—for an instant—the form of the Holy Dragon.

The battle had lasted only a moment. Glancing back to where I’d been standing a second before, I saw the ground had caved in and the remnants of what appeared to be countless spears of ice poking out of the concave floor. If I’d reacted even a moment too late, I’d have been gored. The mere thought of what might have happened had I not sensed the mana around me made my hair stand on end.

“Beautifully done, using the Thunder Dragon’s power to evade our attacks.”

“I feel our holy brother’s benevolent light.”

The twin dragons seemed to almost smile amid the pillar of pale radiance.

"If either of you had been going all out just now, I would have been done for, wouldn't I?" I said.

"Yes. Most certainly."

"But nonetheless, you have passed our last trial splendidly."

"Be proud."

Their words resounded in my mind more gently than usual.

"We pray that we meet again," they said together.

"Until then, I hope you'll study diligently and master our powers."

"And that you will use them for good."

A bright blue light flowed into the Illusion Staff and the necklace around my neck, followed by a green one.

"Stay the coming demon invasion and protect the world until the hero appears. It is up to you, sage."

"Stave off the miasma from the lands we call home."

I hesitated to consent to the sudden jump in scale their requests had taken, but surely they knew I couldn't do *everything*. So I answered the way I always did. "I'll, uh...do what I can."

"When the world is on the brink of ruin, remove Lafjiluna's seal."

"This, we know you can do. The newest sage."

"Lafjiluna? What even is that?"

"We wish you luck on your path to a quiet death," the twin dragons echoed. Leaving with a chorus of raucous guffaws, their bodies faded away.

"Why does *every* single dragon have to spout some esoteric nonsense and leave without actually telling me anything?" I grumbled.

I wanted to scream, but the twin dragons were finally free. I decided it was time to get out of this place without even waiting for Nadia to wake up.

16 — One-Way

Coins fell where the twin dragons disappeared, along with a bow and a jar. Figuring they were important, I gathered them all up and headed for the door. That name the dragons had left me with—Lafjiluna—lingered in the back of my mind and put a damper on any excitement I would have felt about having freed the Water and Wind Dragons. Deciding I'd take it out on the Spirit of Gales, I left with a bit more of a pep in my step.

I wasn't prepared for what awaited me at the top of the stairs, however.

"Where'd the elevator go?"

Thinking about it, the others couldn't have been waiting here for a week without food. I investigated the location where the magic elevator had last been but found no mechanism with which to call it back down.

"What kind of elevator only works one way?" I groaned.

Was it to keep anyone who might have snuck in from getting back out? I looked up. The shaft extended far above me, too high for any human to ever hope to reach, and I wondered if I was going to need to put the Wind Dragon's power to the test right away.

"One wrong move and I could fall to my death. But what would I do once I'm up there? It's not like I can control the thing from the bottom."

I was beginning to regret not giving Lydia an arclink crystal or confirming Olford's mana signature to contact them. There was the Telepathy skill, but even if I went out of my way to spend SP on it, it was limited to only a dozen or so meters at low levels.

I cleared my head and went over the facts. Every labyrinth I'd been to, even the random cave where I had found the Earth Dragon, had come with a magic return circle. But there wasn't one here. So it wasn't a labyrinth? Or they could have removed the circle deliberately to maintain its secrecy.

"Wait..."

The other element that all labyrinths shared was the magic stone core. That

was missing here too. And if the dragons had fought with the Wicked One wherever it was, they would have probably wanted to hide something.

An escape plan began to formulate in my head. Lord Reinstar would have anticipated a situation like this and included some kind of emergency exit. If Nadia were awake, she could have searched with me, and Lydia and the spirit were surely coming by to check on us at least once a day, so it was possible I'd miss them while investigating on my own. But there was no point crying over what-ifs.

At a loss for leads, I turned back to go through the doorway again, when I saw a strange light leaking through from the other side. I followed it, and I came to a door much smaller than the one before it, which seemed to be the source of the light. It was slightly ajar. I approached until I could faintly make out what sounded like a voice, but it was too faint to hear properly.

"Is someone there?" I called out. "I'm coming in."

I pulled on the small door, and a surge of gold coins spilled out onto me like a waterfall. No, not just coins—weapons, armor, magic items, furniture all poured out at once. The twin dragons' hoarding tendencies aside, if there really were people inside, they could have been hurt. So I cleaned up the area by throwing everything into the magic bag and eventually managed to peek into the room.

Inside, I found Lydia and Olford.

"You guys good?" I asked.

Their responses were faint. There was no telling how long they'd been stuffed in here. I cast Extra Heal at once, their bodies glowed, and I sighed in relief when I saw they were breathing.

"Passed out. If that didn't wake them up, guess I'll have to wait. But what is this place?" Scanning the room, bookshelves suspended in the air lined the walls. Now, *this* was the kind of "magic archive" I'd expect from the name. "Don't tell me *this* is the real magic archive."

"Spot on."

I spun around in shock at the sudden reply to my absentminded rambling. Olford was back on his feet.

“You’re okay,” I said.

“Olford’s body nearly met its end, but your magic came just in the nick of time,” the spirit said. “And it even cured the man’s irritable bowels!”

“Healing magic can’t cure diseases. Now, what was that? This is the real archive?”

“Well, it cured *this* disease...” The spirit cleared Olford’s throat. “Only those blessed by the spirits can enter here. People I’ve judged to be pure myself. But all of a sudden, the Wind Dragon’s possessions came raining down on us without end! We were just about crushed to death, and this room very nearly became our tomb.”

“All I can say is, you picked a bad time to study. I’ll apologize when Olford and Lydia are awake,” I said. “I think everything might have appeared at once because the dragons were freed from the Wicked One’s curse.”

“They were cursed? But that can’t be!”

The facts as I understood them were that, in Lord Reinstar’s absence, Neldahl stayed in the sky thanks to the efforts of the Spirit of Gales and the twin dragons. Based on this, my theory was that it was done through the spirit’s contract with the guildmaster combined with leaving the dragons’ door unlocked, thus allowing them to manipulate mana outside. But then, how had the spirit not noticed anything was wrong with the dragons? If they really hadn’t seen each other in years, I had a guess as to what might have caused the rift between the deities.

It lined up with the labyrinth appearing at Church Headquarters. Then again, maybe I was totally off base and spirits and dragons just didn’t get along, or maybe it had something to do with the fact that Her Holiness had stopped visiting.

“How did you, the Spirit of Gales, not realize that the Wicked One had infiltrated your city?” I asked. “The dragons seemed to suggest that there was more going on.” Knowing wouldn’t do us much good, but I had to ask.

“There was a time when the Wind Dragon, the Water Dragon, and I, along with that peculiar Rein, with his odd ability to tolerate the dragons and their

habits, all shared drinks together,” the spirit recalled fondly.

“All of you together? Wait, drinks?”

“Dragons and spirits can take human form. It’s just not something we do often because it takes an utterly grotesque amount of magic. In the past, though, Rein would supply us with the mana to enjoy each other’s company for a limited time.”

I’d seen the spirits manifest in different ways, so I could believe it with them, but the Eternal Dragons? Shrink down to the size of people? And Lord Reinstar had been able to maintain the transformation of two at once, plus a spirit? I supposed it wasn’t beyond his capabilities, considering he had killed the Demon Lord entirely by accident in his time.

Come to think of it, would it be possible to summon his soul or something, like a hero? Then he could clean everything up with the Wicked One lickety-split and I’d go on my merry way, living my peaceful life. Of course, there probably wasn’t enough mana in the world to cover the cost of a guy like that. Maybe I’d ask him about it if I remembered the next time we met in Rockford.

“Don’t old friends usually check up on each other?” I asked.

“The dragons got into a fight one day, and many things happened. Many quarrels were had. Neldahl itself nearly fell from the sky.” The old man grimaced as if fighting back tears. “And ever since, they haven’t so much as offered me a single greeting.”

I didn’t have it in me to press any harder. There wasn’t exactly a mediator for conflicts between dragons and spirits, so I sympathized with their plight. I looked away awkwardly and realized that the small door I’d entered through was suddenly gone.

“Where’d the door go?”

“It’s invisible to those who enter without my explicit authorization,” the spirit replied boastfully.

The mood seemed in a decent enough place again for me to change the subject. “Before the dragons vanished, they told me something I don’t understand,” I said. “They said to ‘remove Lafjiluna’s seal when the world is on

the brink of ruin.’ Do you know what that means? Is Lafjiluna a person? A dragon? A spirit? Some magic sword? I’m really at a loss here.”

“That is a question better answered by Pope Fluna. I should not speak lightly when I know not the great Lafjiluna’s true will. And yet...” The spirit trailed off into sentimental rumination.

The “great” Lafjiluna, huh? I’d have to talk with Her Holiness if I wanted answers.

Putting Lydia safely into another hermit coffin until she awoke, we left the room.

17 — Rumors

The archive we left was, in fact, the true magic archive. Recovering from the shock of finding it in such a place, I was about to make a beeline for my room when the spirit stopped me.

“I can authorize you for access to the archive if you like,” they said.

“No, that’s okay. I didn’t come to Neldahl looking for anything I’d learn there.”

“Then you’re returning to the world below?”

“I wanted to see the town, but yeah, looks that way. After I figure some things out that I’ve got on my mind.”

“By all means, tell me if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“There is one thing, actually. Assuming this city was modeled after labyrinths, and since every labyrinth with an Eternal Dragon that I’ve been to had a magic core and a teleport circle at the very end, why weren’t there any when I freed the dragons this time?”

“This troubles you?”

“The teleport circle aside, anyone who touches the core becomes undead, and it could potentially summon the Wicked One. I just want to make sure no one can tamper with it if it does exist.”

“We will consider measures to prevent such an eventuality.”

“Please do.”

The spirit fell into thought, so I left him behind and headed for my room. The halls were colored orange by the sunset.

“It’s late,” I murmured. “I don’t think I’ve eaten today. Man, I’m hungry.” I changed my destination to the cafeteria. “Maybe I’ll make something simple. Or maybe I’ll get a little fancy? I can purify things again, so I can afford to make a bit of a mess now.”

I debated what my first cooked meal with my holy magic back would be, but

when I finally got to the cafeteria, someone unexpected was waiting for me there. The Blanche noble I had been financially assisting for some time now, Elinesse Meinrich, and her attendants.

“Where have you been, Mister Luciel?” she asked frantically, though she was generally high-strung to begin with. “There’s an emergency, and I’ve been searching for you everywhere!”

“I apologize. There were some...studies that needed my full attention for the past few days, but I’ve just returned. What’s the emergency?”

The three of them fidgeted and struggled to speak, so for a moment, I assumed they needed more money. But they had told me their research had finally borne fruit just a few days ago. Had they celebrated prematurely?

The real cause for their trepidation, however, would leave me speechless.

“Well, um...there are rumors going around that...that you’ve been subject to divine punishment, lost your healer job, and can no longer use holy magic. My benefactors at home have asked that I ascertain the veracity of these claims.”

Divine punishment was a bit of hyperbole, but that aside, how in the world had information so detailed and vital spread that far? Even if they were just rumors, the fact that such rumors had made it to a foreign country was kind of crazy, and it hadn’t even been four months since I’d come to Neldahl. Arclink crystals could carry news vast distances in an instant, but it didn’t make sense that someone would pick a fight with the entirety of Shurule just to spread hearsay.

The only logical conclusion was that someone had purposefully outed my secret or someone completely unrelated had noted my absence and was up to something. And even supposing it never amounted to anything, there was still the fact that it would make me doubt. The perpetrator’s goal could have been to make me lose trust in my closest companions, but honestly, even without my S-rank title there was always Brod, the Adventurer’s Guild, and the folks at Yenice. Not that a peaceful life would come to me that easily at this point.

While ruminating, I’d nearly forgotten about Elinesse and her attendants standing in front of me. “So, your country ordered you to do some investigating?” I asked. “Why would you spill that to me upfront?”

Elinesse smiled and held a small pouch out to me. “I do not make it a habit to repay generosity with deceit. It’s thanks to you that our research has proven fruitful, and I am no longer a tool of political marriage. I owe my ability to stay here in Neldahl to you, so take this. It’s everything I owe you. Thank you, truly.”



That was a surprise. I'd honestly half expected to never see my money again, but I realized now that Blanche had no shortage of noble women, in the most literal sense. Elinesse must have really had her back to the wall if her freedom to marry who she wanted was riding on her success. Despite our rocky first meeting, I respected her, and I realized that I'd judged her too harshly.

"Nadia and Lydia handled the finances, so thank them instead when you see them again," I said. "Anyway, do you have any idea where those rumors originated from?"

"Are they true? Are you really no longer a healer? Is your holy magic lost?" Elinesse looked up at me with pleading eyes. They were full of genuine concern.

"Well, I'm not a healer anymore. That part's true."

"Divines..." She looked downcast. "Then your miraculous healing magic really is no more?"

Perhaps there was someone she'd been hoping for me to use it on. I felt too guilty to let the misunderstanding continue.

"Oh, no. I can use it just fine. *Middle Heal.*" I smiled as I cast the spell. Her hands and skin had been looking a little worn from all the work she'd been doing.

"Ah, that feels wonderful," she moaned. "I knew you'd never be punished by the divines. It relieves me to know that your lack of magic was a baseless accusation."

The tension visibly left Elinesse and her attendants. Was it just me, or was I kind of being deified? No pedestals for me, please.

"If you don't know where the rumors came from, is there any information you *can* give me?"

Elinesse put her hand to her chin in thought for a moment. "There was word that Illumasia has become haunted by demons, so they've reached an armistice with the Kingdom of Luburk. Also, the empire has formally requested the aid of Shurule's paladins in exterminating the new threat."

I'd heard that more and more paladin regiments were being sent on

deployments, when in the past it had almost been exclusively the Valkyries. But if demons were on the menu, the Valkyries probably weren't getting to rest anytime soon. Hopefully Lumina and her girls could handle it all.

"How recent is that news?" I asked.

"Relatively new. I heard about it just three days ago. My countrymen are getting nervous and worry that demons will make their way into Blanche before long. According to other researchers I've spoken with at the guild, there have been sightings in every country so far."

But if that was the case, why was Illumasia the only one requesting Shurule's aid? It was hard to say, since I wasn't the most well versed in foreign politics, but I did know that people typically didn't want to die, so those in power were likely mass-hiring mercenaries and guards. And yet, Illumasia should have already been completely militarized from the war. Working under the assumption that the empire was behind all this, then by calling for Shurule's paladins and pitting them against demons, they would be able to accurately estimate the country's overall fighting strength. And then they'd have a potentially easier victory against a rival nation with a weakened military.

That didn't quite sit right with me, though. Illumasia hadn't even dealt with Luburk yet. To suddenly turn their swords on Shurule would be suicide. The empire and I didn't get along very well, but I was willing to admit they weren't that stupid. This was seriously too much crap to happen in a single week without communication.

"Is there any report on damage?"

"No," Elinesse replied. "Only eyewitness accounts. But word is spreading remarkably fast. The situation below seems to be rather precarious."

"That figures." I sighed to clear my head. I had to get everything straight and decide on an action plan or else nothing would get done.

First, the matter regarding me. The only ones who knew the truth about my situation were the people who'd been there when it had happened: the pope, Catherine, and Lumina. It had taken months for rumors to even begin circulating, though, so there was a high chance they had just been conveniently fabricated to make use of my disappearance. I was back in shape now, so they

could be dealt with easily enough, assuming Brod and Lionel hadn't already gone on a rampage.

If this got out of hand and a slander campaign started around me, it would bring the Church and Healer's Guild crumbling down, throwing them back into chaos. So whoever was behind it all, that had to be part of their goal. And if I were a demon or someone leading them, I would be analyzing reports from the least successful areas and trying to figure out what was getting in our way. In that case, I'd learn about a nosy healer named Luciel, and then I'd want to know as much about him as I could. If there were reports that he'd potentially lost his holy magic, I'd send a spy to Church HQ to verify it.

I also had to consider the possibility that the true target here was the pope, not me. There were certainly grounds to push the blame onto her, though she *was* Lord Reinstar's daughter. She probably wasn't a pushover, but I couldn't see her putting up much of a fight. It was a good thing Catherine would be able to protect her, but without Her Holiness, there would be a schism within the Church.

To prevent all of that, I had to prove that I could still use holy magic. It was the only thing I could think of trying. Times like this made me really wish I'd made Galba teach me the ways of information wars. And Olford's transformation magic would have been cool to learn.

But something was still clawing at my mind. I couldn't see the whole picture, and it was an uncomfortable feeling, but I'd have to go back to the surface to grasp what was really going on. Surely someone would have contacted me if demons had suddenly started attacking? On second thought, no one actually knew I'd gotten my magic back, so maybe not.

"Sir?" Elinesse spoke up. I'd gotten lost in my thoughts again. "Will you be returning to the surface?"

"Most likely. I have to do something about those rumors," I replied. "Although I can't say I'm looking forward to going back to a mess of plots and life-threatening dangers. But people who care about me are waiting for me, and I'll never be able to live with myself if I don't do what I can to protect them."

I wasn't interested in concepts like noblesse oblige or going out of my way to

be a model human being, but the people who'd supported me throughout this life had become my role models. The person I wanted to be was someone like them.

"Then take this with you." Elinesse handed me a small, ornate blade.

"What is it?"

"Blood is most precious of all in the dukedom. This weapon represents my status, and none but an earl may order one who carries it."

I had a bad feeling about freely taking it. A ceremonial weapon sounded like something you'd give your betrothed.

"I don't know if I can accept this," I said awkwardly.

"It was my fiancé's, so I do expect you to return it. But keep it with you for now, so that Nadia and Lydia may know some peace in Blanche."

I really didn't want to, but it didn't seem like I'd get anywhere by arguing. What confused me was that I had no plans to ever visit Blanche, yet Elinesse seemed convinced that I'd be going there eventually.

"I don't know if we'll ever be there, but I'll take good care of it for now."

"I hope we meet again one day."

"Until then."

The noblewoman and her attendants promptly left the dining hall.

"I'm glad we lent her a hand," I murmured. "Now, time to cook while I figure out our next move."

I only prayed that it wouldn't involve brutal combat.

18 — Holy Magic for the Soul

Stewing was perfect for giving oneself time to think. At least, that's what I'd heard somewhere.

Preparing monster meat, I dumped it all into a pot with vegetables and let it simmer. Bouillon, it was called. I could leave it alone for a while, giving me time to put my thoughts together. Thinking wouldn't fill my belly, though, so I munched on something from my magic bag in the meantime.

As the broth bubbled, I carefully skimmed the top to keep it from boiling over and waited for the flavors to come out. The first time the guildmaster of the Holy City Adventurer's Guild, Grantz, had taught me this recipe, he'd barked at me for screwing up and skimming improperly.

"I don't know how he expected a novice to tell the difference between 'the good bits' and scum," I grumbled.

I returned my thoughts to the present. The things Elinesse had told me had to be addressed, especially since rumors had spread abroad. Doubtless all of Shurule had heard them by now. In which case, it was probable that I'd get called in for questioning by less than savory folks, and then all the corrupt healers I'd finally cleaned up would have a foothold to make a resurgence. The guidelines could even be repealed. And if anyone decided to investigate the circumstances of me having lost my holy magic, it'd put Lionel and my master in danger—right after I'd gone through hell and back to save them. Had I learned about all of this any later, there might not have been any hope left to save things.

Wait, Her Holiness had told me not to contact her because there was a risk of someone listening in. But what if I used that to my advantage? I took out my arclink crystal from the magic bag and focused it towards the pope.

"Luciel, why do you contact me?" she asked. There was an uncharacteristic edge of irritation to her voice. *"I told you these communications can be intercepted."*

"It's important, Your Holiness. There are dishonest rumors spreading about

me, and they've already reached neighboring countries."

"Rumors? Explain."

"I overheard a scholar here in the guild, and I could hardly believe my ears. They're saying I was punished by the gods and lost my healer class. That I can't cast holy magic anymore. I'm worried that things have gotten out of hand in the Holy City."

"You say this has spread abroad?" Her Holiness seemed to intuit that this meant the rumors were rampant within her own city.

"I believe we should have told the public about my promotion to sage *before* I left to study spellcasting in Neldahl," I said. "It seems avoiding public attention has backfired."

The pope paused for a moment. *"You never were one for publicity."*

"I apologize for this, Your Holiness. Neither of us could have anticipated such ill intent would emerge the moment I came to the City in the Sky to learn other forms of magic."

"Indeed. Has your time been fruitful otherwise?"

"It's not perfect, but I've practiced enough to make whoever spread these rumors look like an utter fool. Unless we take action, potential upstarts might make our lives difficult."

"Might I request your return, then?"

"Yes, Your Holiness. I never even knew demons were causing chaos down below, so when I heard the rest, I couldn't believe it. As gentle a leader as I know you are, please do not hesitate to call for me when the nation is in danger." I spoke as cheerfully as I could.

"I simply couldn't tear you away from your well-deserved break, diligent as you surely were with your studies," the pope replied, her tone chipper again.

"It is what it is. I'll inform Guildmaster Olford and be on my way."

"Until then."

"With your leave, Your Holiness."

The connection ended. And just then, Nadia and Lydia emerged from their hermit coffins at the same time. Really, their timing was almost uncanny. Was it because they were sisters? Or did the Draconis and Elemental have a flair for the dramatic?

“Ah, you’re both awake,” I said.

“I’m glad to see you safe, sir,” Nadia replied.

“Something smells good,” remarked Lydia.

The former had been put into a dragon-induced coma while the latter had nearly been crushed to death. All things considered, they seemed fine.

“Before you two tell me what happened, let me fill you in on everything.” I waited for them to nod, then explained the situation. “...so we’ll have to save visiting the town for next time, but I promise I’ll find time to come back.”

“If there’s nothing to be done about it,” Nadia said.

“As long as you bring us back some time,” said Lydia. “More importantly, I’m very hungry, sir.”

A smile came over me at Lydia’s blushing face, and then we had dinner. Stashing the still-cooking pot in my bag, I took out some leftovers. As we ate, I listened to what had happened to the sisters. Nadia had met with the Draconis and become able to subjugate the dragons as the true Drakesworn. Her class had also changed to dracoknight. Lydia, meanwhile, had learned to summon greater spirits with her blessing.

“In order for me to make the dragons loyal to me, however,” Nadia continued, “I must first best them in battle.”

Sounded like something you’d find in a video game.

“I don’t have enough mana and my skills are too low to summon spirits, so I still need to level up,” Lydia added.

Their levels were already nothing to sneeze at. If she still needed to be stronger to summon those things, they must have really been something.

“If only everything came easy,” I said. “Well, now that you’ve got these new powers, the only thing left to do is to master them.”

“Yes, sir.”

After dinner, once everything was cleaned up, we hurried to Olford’s office. We went through the whole guild without a single locked door in our way, as if my and Lydia’s spirit blessings gave us a free pass to the entire place. Nadia tried to ascend the stairs next to the reception desk, but a wall appeared blocking her path. Lydia held her hand, though, and she finally made it up.

We knocked upon reaching the door to the guildmaster’s room.

“Yes? Who is it?” a voice asked from the other side.

“Luciel. I need a bit of your time, if that’s all right.”

“By all means.”

I opened the door and entered, but another visitor was within.

“Something wrong?” Olford asked. Assuming it was Olford and not the spirit.

I hesitated to speak in the presence of a stranger. “I didn’t know someone was here before me. I’ll come back later.”

“If you prefer, but surely you came to me on some form of urgent business.”

The man sitting opposite Olford stood up and turned to face me. “My presence prevents you from speaking. Apologies, Mister Luciel, S-rank healer. Ah, but you’re no longer the latter, I hear. Then perhaps I may simply greet you as Luciel.”

His voice was deep enough for me to presume he was a man, but his face was hidden behind a mask. What concerned me most wasn’t his knowledge of me, though. It was the fact that I could’ve sworn I knew him and the subtle aggression dripping from his words. Was he a healer? Or had Illumasia finally made a move against me?

I straightened my posture and regarded him carefully. “You’re correct that I’m no longer a healer,” I said. “But *S-rank* healer is nothing more than a title bestowed by the guild, regardless of one’s job. Now, might you identify yourself? I don’t believe I’m acquainted with anyone who would hide themselves behind a mask.”

“This is the newest researcher from Luburk,” Olford introduced him, stepping

in at the sign of conflict. It didn't seem like the spirit was in control. "Er, what was your name again?"

The man was silent for a while. "A funny thing, fate is. You've done nothing to me, and yet I am inclined to say I loathe you. I am the hapless slave you chose to ignore in Yenice."

He was honest, if nothing else. I had no vivid recollection of him, but there was only one slave in Yenice I had spoken to and never ended up purchasing.

"Yenice? Are you...?"

"I suppose I should feel honored that you remember our short meeting," the man said. "Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am the newly appanaged Baron Maxim von Wisdom of the Kingdom of Luburk."

So he was a noble now. Actually, I remembered him being an aristocrat's son or something. I'd told him I could only buy him if he would give up on revenge, but he'd turned me down. What was his problem with me?

"Mind telling me why you 'loathe' me?" I asked.

"Abandonment, if I must answer. You were the world's greatest healer, and you could have rescued me from this fate."

Maxim removed his mask, revealing a horribly disfigured face, scarred as if burned beyond recognition. And when he removed his robe, miasma began to emanate from his body.

"What is that?"

"A curse, I'm told. After our meeting, the Illumasian Empire used my body for experiments and implanted a magic stone into my flesh. I blacked out from the agony, and they must have assumed I had died, because when I awoke, I found myself in a mountain of corpses."

"And no one in Luburk was able to treat you?"

"No. Not in all the world. I was freed from the magic stone, but my body emits this miasma—as if I'm more demon than man now. So when I heard there was a man of unparalleled skill with holy magic—you—I hurried to the Church of Saint Shurule to beg your help."

But I hadn't been there. Maxim seemed aware that his hatred was misplaced, but I was his last hope, and he knew it. His anger towards the empire was likely so strong that it was overpowering his emotions and causing him to see the world through a veil of negativity. So he was venting those feelings through me. When I thought of it that way, I sort of understood him, and I was honestly impressed by how well he was controlling himself.

I decided to help him. If for no other reason than to settle the guilt I felt for having done nothing for him in the past. This, too, must have been the design of Monsieur Luck.

"Well, Sir Wisdom, let me clear something up," I said. "As it happens, I have not lost the ability to use holy magic."

Maxim's expression, which had been filled with brooding despair, suddenly went blank. "Pardon?"

"Listen, this is confidential, but the reason I'm not a healer anymore is because I became a sage. I can use holy magic just fine—better than before, even."

"Th-Then this body of mine could be..." Comically uncharacteristic desperation adorned his face.

"I can't promise that I'll be able to cure you. If you're undead, you'll die instantly. But if you're still with the living, I'll find a way." I nodded resolutely.

"I'll pay any price!" Maxim blubbered. "I'll never forgive the empire for what they did to me, but say the word and I'll rid my mind of all thoughts of revenge! Please, heal me! I beg of you!"

He was actually willing to give up on the whole vengeance thing, finally. Wow, he must have been through hell. Especially considering how much of a one-eighty his attitude had taken. I was already planning to have him take an oath anyway, so that worked out.

"Then swear to me, under contract, that as payment for treatment, you'll disclose all information known to you, and that you will not come into conflict with me in the future."

"Does...that include national secrets?"

“Only if it concerns me or the Republic of Saint Shurule. What I’m looking for is anything to do with the goings-on in Illumasia.”

“Then I, Maxim von Wisdom, as payment for the following treatment, do hereby swear to disclose all relevant information to you, Mister Luciel, and to never come into conflict with you in the future.”

Light glowed around him.

“Okay, this might sting a bit, but bear with me here.”



I cast Dispel, Recover, Purification, Sanctuary Circle, and Extra Heal in succession, concluding with one more Purification. Maxim grimaced at first, but the pain seemed to dissipate by the time Sanctuary Circle activated.

Then things got complicated.

When Extra Heal came out, the man collapsed. All of his limbs and both his eyes fell apart and rolled onto the floor. They were artificial. Shock colored his expression and he began to tremble, but clearly not out of anger.

Maxim touched his new limbs, and tears began to overflow from his newly restored eyes. With the final Purification spell, the treatment was complete.

“That’s it,” I said. “Well done.”

The man babbled something incoherent before kneeling before me as if offering a prayer of reverence. It made me remember the time Lionel and the others had done the same when I had first healed their severe conditions after buying them.

“I came here to tell you that we’ll be returning to the surface,” I told Olford. “But I’d like to hear what he has to say first.”

Olford uttered an odd, surprised noise. “Right, yes, well...the room is yours.”

19 — A Not-So-Merry Homecoming

Compared to our meeting in Yenice two years prior, Maxim seemed like a totally different man. Where there was once noble dignity, pride, and a twinge of naivety was now fierce assertiveness. The innocent hatred of his Illumasian conquerors was overshadowed by the pain of living in a body forged in the flames of hell itself.

Or maybe I was overthinking it. Either way, I was getting tired of gazing into his eyes.

“First, where did you hear rumors that I’d been punished by the gods and stripped of my class?”

“Word initially reached Luburk some weeks ago, and I myself only caught wind of it at a gathering of nobles. My peers seemed long aware of it, so I’m afraid I can’t speak to the original source.”

A few weeks ago... But if everyone knew about it at the gathering, it must have been earlier than that. And they were just rumors. Without anyone to verify them, that was all they’d ever be, so it should have fizzled out long before spreading to any significant degree.

“I can’t exactly come down on you, but I take it you believed those rumors,” I said.

“Yes,” von Wisdom replied. “Though when I first heard them, I petitioned the court to ascertain their veracity with Shurule and the Healer’s Guild. Alas, we were given no response.”

“And this concerned you.”

He nodded. “As I’m sure you’re aware, Luburk has petitioned Shurule for your aid numerous times due to the lengthy conflict with the empire.”

I was not, in fact, aware of that. Granted, I wasn’t going to join a war regardless. “I actually didn’t know about that.”

“It’s understandable they wouldn’t want to dispatch their first S-rank in decades to a battlefield. Regardless, those rejections coupled with the rumors

began to sow seeds of doubt that there ever was an S-rank healer to begin with.”

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, after all. But still...”

“Indeed. I had met you myself, so I never heeded such talk. But then the guild began to scramble to cover their tracks.”

That couldn’t have looked good. Or wait, maybe that was the point. Maybe someone was trying to stir the pot.

“And that struck you as suspicious, I assume.”

“Yes. It told me there was some truth to the gossip.”

Everything made sense so far. Meaning Lionel and Brod were in danger. In danger of going on a rampage, that is...

I took a deep breath to resituate myself. “Then it sounds like I need to hurry back. But before that, I’d like to hear more about the experiments Illumasia was conducting. Do you have any idea what they hope to gain by embedding magic stones in people?”

“In my case, they were attempting to amplify the quantity of my mana. The stone was supposedly purified, but my body reacted poorly and began to produce miasma, so I was deemed a failure.”

Yeah, that sounded like demon research. At best, they were trying to make supersoldiers, and neither of those options were good.

“Did you hear anything about attempts to harness the power of demons? Maybe a tool for transforming people into them?” I asked.

“I’m afraid not. Talk of demons came up, but only in the context of exterminating them. I saw nothing resembling a demon either.”

“Exterminating? They’re not in league?”

“Not to my knowledge.” Maxim gave a self-derisive smile. “I imagine Luburk would have had little fighting chance if they were.”

Okay, now I was confused. He couldn’t have been lying while under contract, so the only question was the accuracy of the information. I knew I was biased,

of course, but there was everything Lionel had told me, the fact that they'd tried to undermine Yenice from the shadows, the way they forced people to provide them with slaves, and the fact that they were known warmongers. Come to think of it, Lionel was Illumasian nobility. Perhaps the loss of their Lion of War had been a bigger blow than expected.

Suddenly, something hit me. I remembered a certain someone I'd heard was supposedly still running around the empire.

"Baron Maxim, have you ever met the Lion of War?"

"I have. I could never forget the one who planted that magic stone in my body."

So there really was an imposter going around giving Lionel a bad name.

"There was a slave I purchased back in Yenice who'd lost the use of his legs. Do you remember him?"

He thought for a moment before quickly nodding. "I do recall that elderly gentleman. He was very kind to me."

I'd almost forgotten that Lionel really had looked like a frail old man back then. I nearly snorted at the thought of how Maxim might react upon seeing him now.

"That was Lionel, more widely known as the Lion of War," I said. "He's currently in Yenice on my orders. The one in Illumasia is a fake."

"Impossible!" von Wisdom shouted. "The man I met was called General Lionel, and I recognized his face from the battlefields of my homeland!"

I turned to Olford, who was listening off to the side. "Would you mind transforming into me, Guildmaster?"

"Very well," he replied. A moment later and a second me was standing in the room. "Like this?"

"Perfect. Feels weird staring at myself. Anyway, can anyone cast magic like that?"

"Anyone deft enough to be able to control both fire and water magic at once. It takes a considerable amount of mana to maintain, though, so it can't be held

indefinitely.”

“Is it possible to cast it on someone else?”

“Yes, I... I suppose it is. But it would take exceptional skill at imaging, spellcasting, *and* magic control.”

All one needed was to look the part. If they looked like Lionel, it could fool anyone.

“Is that enough for you, Baron Maxim?” I asked.

“It’s... It’s unbelievable,” he stammered. “But if what you say is true, then...it must be why I once witnessed him hurry to don an iron mask.”

It seemed he was onto something. If they were that careful to hide the fake’s identity, it stood to reason they’d be keeping an eye on the real Lionel, but it wouldn’t make sense for both Lionel and Brod to fail to notice something like that. Could the source of these rumors have been working with this imposter? Maxim looked beside himself with confusion.

“Lionel is a man who fights to protect the ones he cares about,” I said. “That’s why he’s always the vanguard. I don’t think he’s the type to play dirty or try underhanded tricks.”

“The older gentleman was the real one? Then the other was...”

“A fabrication.”

“Damn it all!” the baron spat. The cognitive dissonance had worked him up into a state. Had he met the man himself, he might not have been able to contain his emotions.

I’d been operating for so long under the assumption that the empire was in cahoots with demons, but now I had to separate the truth from the lies. In any case, I’d gotten all I could from the man.

“Will you be staying in Neldahl?” I asked him.

“That was my intention. But seeing as my goal was to research possible methods of healing myself, that seems redundant now.”

“Then what will you do?”

“At the very least, I’ve no reason to linger here.”

“I’m glad I was able to help you.”

“As am I. Words can’t describe my gratitude. Please, rely upon me should you want for anything.” His expression relaxed into a smile.

“Thank you. And let your friends in Luburk know that I didn’t ‘lose’ my healer class. I simply became a sage.”

“I will make it known that the rumors were an attempt to slander your name.” He smiled a little wider. “I should think a single look at me will suffice as proof.”

After informing Olford of the details, he escorted us to the magic circle we had come to the city with.

“Well, this is it,” the old man said. “I’ll be sending you right back to where you came from.”

“Thank you for everything,” I replied.

“’Twas a pleasure. Although, might I ask for a little...something? As a token of appreciation?”

I immediately caught his drift. “Of course.”

I took out a bottle of honey, and then a second bottle of something else.

“Goodness, you’re giving me two?”

“Unfortunately, the other one is Substance X. If any monsters give you trouble, give them a taste of it. I hear it even works on dragons.”

“I...suppose it would be rude of me to refuse.”

I exchanged mana signatures with him for future arclink communication, then promised von Wisdom that we’d meet again someday.

“The next time you’re here, we’ll celebrate with mead,” Olford said.

“I’d like that.”

“Nadia, Lydia, Come back should the urge to study magic ever strike your fancy again.”

“We’d love a tour of the town when the time comes,” Nadia said.

“I’ll keep doing my best to get my magic down. Elemental *and* spirit-based!” Lydia declared.

The old guildmaster offered us one more kind and warm grin, as a gentle grandfather might give his grandkids.

“Until next time, Baron,” I told Maxim.

“The whole kingdom will know the truth when I return. This I swear,” he replied.

Olford poured his magic into the circle, and light shone from the sigils until the three of us were engulfed. Our four eventful months in Neldahl had come to an end.

Elsewhere — A Master's Connptions

Brod felt an odd sense of unease as he watched Luciel leave for the City in the Sky. Now was the time when his apprentice needed him more than ever, and yet with his level and skills reset, he would only be dead weight. He knew it better than anyone. And although he was more than enthusiastic about regaining his lost strength, guildmaster duties would not afford him the time he so desperately wanted...

Back in his early adventuring days, there was hardly a moment's rest in between extermination contracts and training. He was free, though. Fulfilled. His peers came from all walks of life, each striving for their own goals, but they all walked the same path. A path of daily struggle, self-improvement, and the shared desire to be a top-class adventurer. These would someday be the peers who acknowledged that he, Brod, was indeed the best.

And then, one day, his life would change forever when Adventurer's Guild HQ came to him with a simple offer: become a guildmaster. It was a simple measure, primarily motivated by the hope that Brod's leadership could alter their course from the steadily rising mortality rates, founded on the belief that guidance from a top-class adventurer would improve the competence of all the guild's members. Perhaps by joining the adventurers on dangerous missions, needless deaths could be avoided. This was to be Brod's role.

But Brod refused to give them the time of day.

"You wanna know why I'm at the top?" he asked them. "'Cause I wanna be the strongest. Not to be a good luck charm. And if you think puttin' me up in an office is somehow gonna change things just like that, you've got another thing coming."

This response came as no surprise to the guild. They had anticipated that they would need to be persistent, and so they were. But Brod wasn't the only one being sounded out for the guildmaster position. Several high-ranking adventurers were being considered at the same time, leading to guilds the world over being helmed by many talented and storied veterans.

The results, however, were catastrophic. Fatality rates didn't drop. They *rose*. And jobs were being successfully completed at an all-time low. The guild learned the hard way that skill in adventuring did not equate to skill as a leader. Not everyone had what it took.

When Brod caught wind of this, part of him wanted to tell the bigwigs that he'd told them so, but another part of him started to consider something new—a successor to carry on his ways. And so, two years and one dead dragon after first being offered the position, he finally decided to accept the offer in order to train an apprentice.

Things would not go so smoothly. The only vacancy for the guildmaster position was located in the Republic of Saint Shurule, where monsters worth fighting were few and the money to be made was little. As convenient as it would have been for HQ to have pulled some strings, there wasn't much to be done about the guildmasters they themselves had just appointed. The strongest adventurer would have to set up shop in the one country where he wasn't needed. HQ wasn't confident it would go over well.

But Brod had made his decision to find an apprentice, so he accepted the position and became the guildmaster of the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild.

It didn't take long for him to become disillusioned with their clientele. The adventurers were lackadaisical, more concerned with climbing arbitrary ranks and figuring out how best to laze the day away than with actually improving. Brod attempted to remedy this by tutoring them in the underground training hall, but very few were receptive to his lessons. Still, he didn't give up. He focused his efforts on those who would listen until they were strong enough to leave the Shurule nesting grounds, and gradually fatality rates fell and job completion went up.

Having proven his talents, HQ sought to transfer him to a branch in need of him even more, but Brod would have none of it. He knew that a busier guild with more traffic meant more annoying deskwork. He preferred to spend his time outside a stuffy office, with the adventurers, bettering himself and others.

Returning to the present, Brod was facing his arch-nemesis once more. Literal mountains of paperwork that had appeared over the course of the several

months he'd been away. A single look at it was all he needed.

"Galba! Gulgar!" he barked. "You're vice guildmasters! Why didn't you two deal with this shit?"

"Galba took care of a lot of it, actually," Gulgar said. "But one mountain goes down and another one pops up to take its place. Grandol's been harpin' on us for a while now."

"And we couldn't go sending them reports when we didn't know what in the hell you were getting up to over there," Galba added.

Brod glanced back at the papers. True enough, they all needed *his* specific attention. "How am I supposed to get back in shape like this? Remind me why I bothered coming back again."

Galba pushed him towards the desk and sat him down like a parent with a grumbling child. "Complain if you must, but do it while you work, please."

"Don't forget you'll be needin' my cookin' while you train your butt off," Gulgar quipped.

"You've gotta be... Fine! Whatever! I'll do it, so get off my back, will ya?!"

"I knew you'd see reason," Galba said. "Now, there is one thing I should mention."

Brod looked up at him with a nasty grimace. "Does it ever end? What the hell is it this time?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. I need more information before I can be certain if it's anything dangerous, so I'm working on gathering intel before I fill you in."

"Sounds perfect to me."

And so Brod's deskwork montage began, punctuated by five meals a day (Substance X included). Within a month, the evil was slain, the only work remaining was routine. Galba, too, was finally ready to report.

"There have been cases of mass amnesia in Illumasia and Luburk as well as demon sightings in various locations."

The Wicked One's face immediately came to mind, but Brod quickly dispelled

the possibility of his involvement. He didn't seem the type to cause trouble in such a roundabout way.

"Mass amnesia? Someone screw up their dark magic research or somethin'? And what's that about demons?"

"As far as I know, it's all eyewitness testimony and there have been no traces of any skirmishes with them. Frankly, I'm amazed it hasn't sparked a panic yet."

Demons were a different breed than normal monsters. They were smarter, dense with mana and miasma, tougher, better at magic—the list went on. If Brod's skills hadn't been reset to level one, he would have been out there hunting the things.

"Sounds like that'll have to be up to you and Gulgar," Brod growled.

"Should I dig up help at Church Headquarters?" Galba offered.

"Nah. First things first; I gotta level up."

"You better not—"

"Gonna head to the forest in the southeast. Hunt some monsters."

"You know I can't let you do that alone!"

"Please." Brod knew very well that he was asking a lot. But Galba also knew that when Brod lowered his head, he meant it.

Galba sighed. "At least let me or Gulgar keep watch until you're at a reasonable level to be on your own."

"I knew you'd see reason," Brod quipped.

"Listen, we just can't have the guildmaster being outmatched by a stiff breeze."

And so began Brod's regular training hunts. But it wasn't long before word that Luciel had supposedly received "divine punishment" reached everyone's ears. Brod immediately started an investigation to track down the source of this gossip, and once he had his mark, he and Galba set out on another hunt. This time for a different kind of prey.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading this volume of *The Great Cleric*. I'm Broccoli Lion, and you know something? I've been having a lot of dreams lately. Sometimes I wake up and it's all a blur. Sometimes I can recall every little detail. I have a habit of writing down the things I remember, because you never know when that material might come in handy, but the ones I *don't* remember always bug me to no end. Wouldn't it be funny if I ended up subconsciously writing them into a story and that's when it all finally came back to me?

Welcome to my state of mind for the past few days. I'm a bit of a daydreamer (unsurprisingly), and I'd like to think that my overactive imagination has been pretty helpful in giving me inspiration for my writing. The part I struggle with is putting it into words on the page, and sometimes the image leaves my head before I can find the right words to describe it. And then it gets fuzzy, the details start to change, and before I know it, I'm introducing plot holes. My notebook of unusable ideas has gotten quite full, to say the least. Still, I like to dream that someday they'll find their use in the pages of one story or another.

Why am I writing about this? Well, it stems from the fact that, as per usual, my editor Mister I returned the first draft of this volume to me with numerous corrections and revisions. Typos, inconsistencies...there were so many big red lines to address. It really made me appreciate the work of Mister I, all the proofreaders, and everyone involved in the process of making these books readable.

That, of course, includes those not directly related to the writing. I'm just as grateful to sime for his wonderful illustrations, and to Hiroyuki Akikaze for bringing all these characters to life in the manga. For all the trouble I may be, I promise I'll always do my best to match up.

And last but not least, none of this would be possible without you, the reader. I'll keep doing everything I can to live up to your expectations, so I hope to see you again in the next volume.

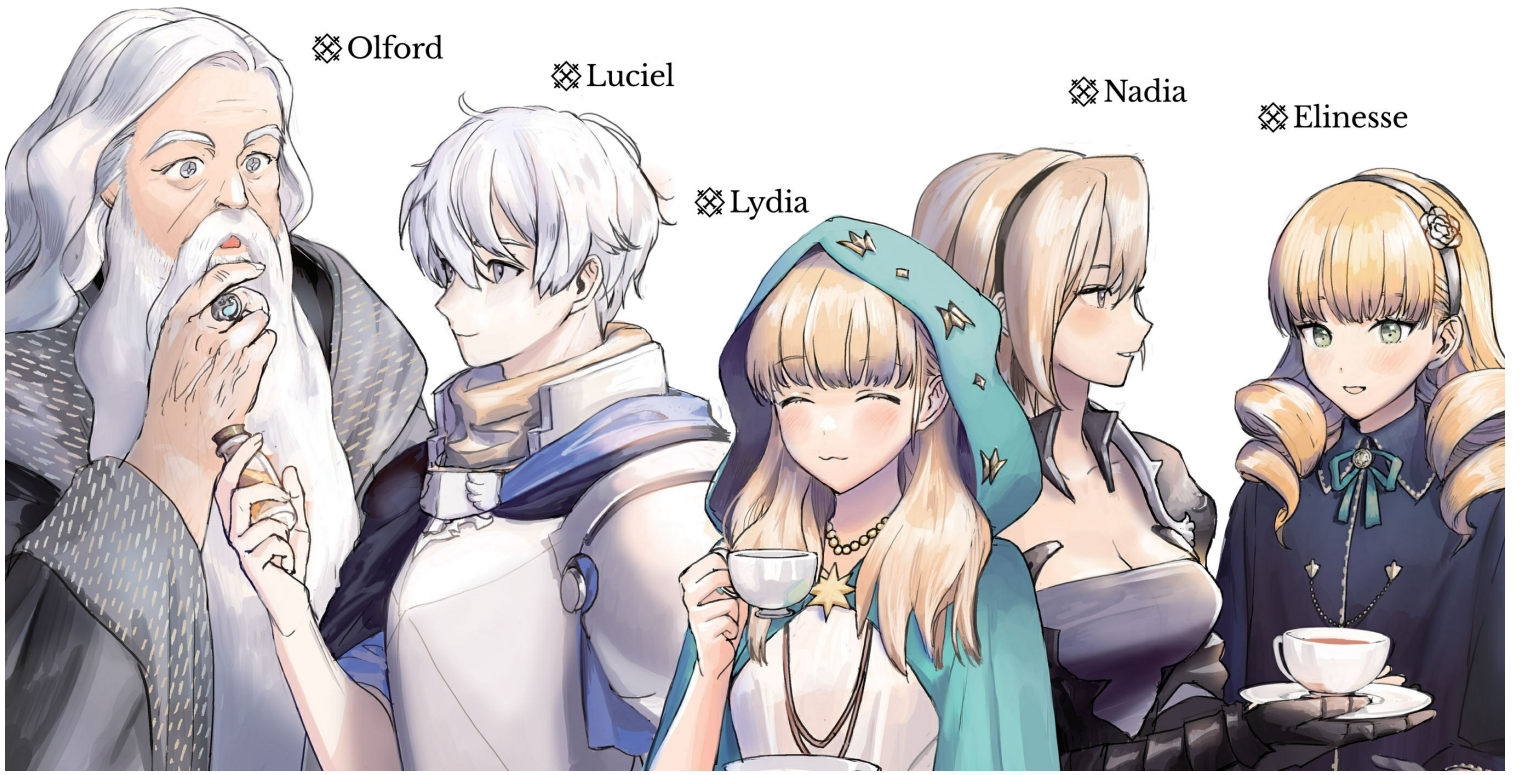




Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

Chapter 10: The City in the Sky

[01 — The Guildmaster of Sorcery](#)

[02 — Plot Twist](#)

[03 — Magical Malfunction and Secrets](#)

[04 — Rumors of the Past](#)

[05 — Values](#)

[06 — Premonitions](#)

[07 — Ready for More](#)

[08 — Leftovers in the Pantry](#)

[09 — Return to Form](#)

[10 — Protection of the God of Fate](#)

[11 — The Protectors](#)

[12 — A Glimpse](#)

[13 — Thinking Outside the Box](#)

[14 — The Awe-Inspiring](#)

[15 — The Twin Dragons' Legacy](#)

[16 — One-Way](#)

[17 — Rumors](#)

[18 — Holy Magic for the Soul](#)

[19 — A Not-So-Merry Homecoming](#)

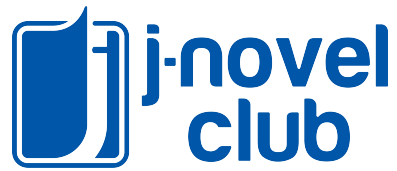
[Elsewhere — A Master's Connptions](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Great Cleric: Volume 9

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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